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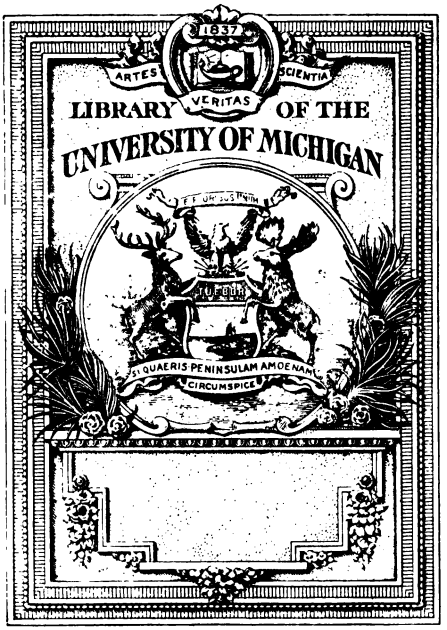
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THE

MARRIAGE OF WILLIAM ASHE

LADY KITTY BRISTOL

Frontispiece

(See page 22)

THE MARRIAGE

OF

WILLIAM ASHE

BY

MRS. HUMPHRY WARD

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALBERT STERNER

SECOND IMPRESSION

LONDON
SMITH, ELDER, & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE
1905

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13 N 04 E.S.

TO

D. M. W.

DAUGHTER AND FRIEND

I INSCRIBE THIS BOOK

March 1905

152667

GENTLE READER,

There are ghosts amid the company that will greet you in this tale, ghosts of men and women well known to an earlier England. Some few of their long-past sayings and doings may be dimly recalled to you by the sayings and doings of persons you will meet in these pages. If so, let me remind you that all that has been may be again, and that the present, whether it be a present of reality or of imagination, is perennially fed from the sources and stimulated by the records of the past.

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PART I

ACQUAINTANCE

'Just oblige me and touch
With your scourge that minx Chloe, but don't hurt her much!'

CHAPTER I

'He ought to be here,' said Lady Tranmore, as she turned away from the window.

Mary Lyster laid down her work. It was a fine piece of church embroidery, which, seeing that it had been designed for her by no less a person than Mr. Burne-Jones himself, made her the envy of her Pre-Raphaelite friends.

Yes indeed. You made out there was a train about twelve.'

'Certainly. They can't have taken more than an hour to speechify after the declaration of the poll. And I know William meant to catch that train if he possibly could.'

'And take his seat this evening?'

Lady Tranmore nodded. She moved restlessly about the room, fidgeting with a book here and there, and evidently full of thoughts. Mary Lyster watched her a little longer, then quietly took up her work again. Her air of well-bred sympathy, the measured ease of her movements, contrasted with Lady Tranmore's impatience. Yet in truth she was listening no less sharply than her companion to the sounds in the street outside.

Lady Tranmore made her way to the window, and

stood there looking out on the park. It was the week before Easter, and the plane-trees were not yet in leaf. But a few thorns inside the park railings were already lavishly green and there was a glitter of spring flowers beside the park walks, not showing, however, in such glorious abundance as became the fashion a few years later. It was a mild afternoon and the drive was full of carriages. From the bow-window of the old irregular house in which she stood, Lady Tranmore could watch the throng passing and re-passing, could see also the traffic in Park Lane on either side. London, from this point of sight, wore a cheerful friendly air. The dim sunshine, the white clouded sky, the touches of reviving green and flowers, the soft air blowing in from a farther window which was open, brought with them impressions of spring, of promise, and re-birth, which insensibly affected Lady Tranmore.

'Well, I wonder what William will do, this time, in Parliament!' she said, as she dropped again into her seat by the fire, and began to cut the pages of a new book.

'He is sure to do extremely well,' said Miss Lyster.

Lady Tranmore shrugged her shoulders. 'My dear—do you know that William has been for eight years—since he left Trinity—one of the idlest young men alive?'

'He had one brief!'

'Yes—somewhere in the country—where all the juniors get one in turn,' said Lady Tranmore. 'That was the year he was so keen and went on circuit, and never missed a sessions. Next year nothing would induce him to stir out of town. What has he done with himself all these eight years? I can't imagine.'

'He has grown—uncommonly handsome,' said Mary Lyster, with a momentary hesitation as she threaded her needle afresh.

'I never remember him anything else,' said Lady Tranmore. 'All the artists who came here and to Narroways wanted to paint him. I used to think it would make him a spoilt little ape. But nothing spoilt him.'

Miss Lyster smiled. 'You know, Cousin Elizabeth—and you may as well confess it at once!—that you think him the ablest, handsomest, and charmingest of men!'

'Of course I do,' said Lady Tranmore calmly. 'I am certain, moreover—now—that he will be Prime Minister. And as for idleness, that, of course, is only a *façon de parler*. He has worked hard enough at the things which please him.'

'There—you see!' said Mary Lyster, laughing.

'Not politics anyway,' said the elder lady reflectively. 'He went into the House to please me, because I was a fool and wanted to see him there. But I must say when his constituents turned him out last year I thought they would have been a mean-spirited set if they hadn't. They knew very well he'd never done a stroke for them. Attendances—divisions—perfectly scandalous!'

'Well here he is, in triumphantly for somewhere else—with all sorts of delightful prospects!'

Lady Tranmore sighed. Her white fingers paused in their task.

'That, of course, is because—now—he's a personage. Everything 'll be made easy for him now. My dear Mary—they talk of England's being a democracy!'

The speaker raised her handsome shoulders; then, as though to shake off thoughts of loss and grief which had suddenly assailed her, she abruptly changed the subject.

'Well—work or no work—the first thing we've got to do is to marry him.'

She looked up sharply. But not the smallest tremor could she detect in Mary Lyster's gently moving hand. There was, however, no reply to her remark.

'Don't you agree, Polly?' said Lady Tranmore, smiling.

Her smile—which still gave great beauty to her face—was charming, but a little sly, as she observed her companion.

'Why, of course,' said Miss Lyster, inclining her head to one side, that she might judge the effect of some green shades she had just put in. 'But that surely will be made easy for him too.'

'Well, after all, the girls can't propose! And I never saw him take any interest in a girl yet—outside his own family, of course,' added Lady Tranmore hastily.

'No—he does certainly devote himself to the married women,' replied Miss Lyster in the half-absent tone of one more truly interested in her embroidery than in the conversation.

'He would sooner have an hour with Madame d'Estrées than a week with the prettiest miss in London. That's quite true, but I vow it's the girls' own fault! They should stand on their dignity—snub the creatures more! In my young days—'

'Ah, there wasn't a glut of us then,' said Mary calmly. 'Listen!'—she held up her hand.

'Yes,' said Lady Tranmore, springing up. 'There he is.'

She stood waiting. The door flew open, and in came a tall young man.

'William, how late you are!' said Lady Tranmore as she flew into his arms.

'Well, mother, are you pleased?'

Her son held her at arm's length, smiling kindly upon her.

LADY TRANMORE AND MARY LYSTER

'Of course I am,' said Lady Tranmore. 'And you—are you horribly tired?'

'Not a bit. Ah, Mary!—how do you do?'

Miss Lyster had risen, and the cousins shook hands.

'But I don't deny it's very jolly to come back—out of all that beastly scrimmage,' said the new member, as he threw himself into an armchair by the fire with his hands behind his head, while Lady Tranmore prepared him a cup of tea.

'I expect you've enjoyed it,' said Miss Lyster, also moving towards the fire.

'Well, when you're in it there's a certain excitement in wondering how you're going to come out of it! But one might say that, of course, of the infernal regions.'

'Not quite,' said Mary Lyster, smiling demurely.

'Polly! you *are* a Tory. Everybody else's hell has moved—but yours! Thank you, mother,' as Lady Tranmore gave him tea. Then, stretching out his great frame in lazy satisfaction, he turned his brown eyes from one lady to the other. 'I say, mother, I haven't seen anything as good-looking as you—or Polly there, if she'll forgive me—for weeks.'

'Hold your tongue, goose,' said his mother as she replenished the teapot. 'What—there were no pretty girls—not one?'

'Well, they didn't come my way,' said William, contentedly munching at bread and butter. 'I have gone through all the usual humbug—and perjured my soul in all the usual ways—without any consolation worth speaking of.'

'Don't talk nonsense, sir,' said Lady Tranmore. 'You know you like speaking—and you like compliments—and you've had plenty of both.'

'You didn't read me, mother!'

'Didn't I?' she said, smiling. He groaned,—and took another piece of tea-cake.

'My own family at least, don't you think, might omit that?'

'H'm, sir—So you didn't believe a word of your own speeches?' said Lady Tranmore, as she stood behind him and smoothed his hair back from his forehead.

'Well, who does?' He looked up gaily and kissed the tips of her fingers.

'And it's in that spirit you're going back into the House?' Mary Lyster threw him the question—with a slight pinching of the lips—as she resumed her work.

'Spirit? What do you mean, Polly? One plays the game of course,—and it has its moments—its hot corners so to speak—or I suppose no one would play it!'

'And the goal?' She lifted a gently disapproving face, in a movement which showed anew the large comeliness of head and neck.

'Why!—to keep the other fellows out, of course!' He lifted an arm and drew his mother down to sit on the edge of his chair.

'William, you're not to talk like that,' said Lady Tranmore decidedly—laying her cheek, however, against his hand the while. 'It was all very well when you were quite a free-lance—but now—— Oh! never mind Mary—she's discreet—and she knows all about it.'

'What—that they're thinking of giving me Hickson's place? Parham has just written to me—I found the letter downstairs—to ask me to go and see him.'

'Oh! it's come?' said Lady Tranmore, with a start of pleasure. Lord Parham was the Prime Minister. 'Now don't be a humbug, William, and pretend you're not pleased. But you'll have to work, mind!' She held up an admonishing finger. 'You'll have to answer letters, mind! —you'll have to keep appointments, mind!'

'Shall I? . . . Ah!—Hudson——'

He turned. The butler was in the room.

'His Lordship, my Lady, would like to see Mr. William before dinner if he could make it convenient.'

'Certainly, Hudson, certainly,' said the young man. 'Tell his Lordship I'll be with him in ten minutes.'

Then, as the butler departed—'How's father, mother?'

'Oh! much as usual,' said Lady Tranmore sadly.

'And you?'

He laid his arm boyishly round her waist, and looked up at her, his handsome face all affection and life. Mary Lyster, observing them, thought them a remarkable pair—he, in the very prime and heyday of brilliant youth, she so beautiful still, in spite of the filling-out of middle life—which, indeed, was at the moment somewhat toned and disguised by the deep mourning, the sweeping crape and dull silk in which she was dressed.

'I'm all right, dear,' she said quietly, putting her hand on his shoulder. 'Now, go on with your tea. Mary—feed him! I'll go and talk to father till you come.'

She disappeared; and William Ashe approached his cousin.

'She *is* better?' he said, with an anxiety that became him.

'Oh! yes. Your election has been everything to her—and your letters. You know how she adores you, William.'

Ashe drew a long breath.

'Yes—isn't it bad luck?'

'William!'

'For her, I mean. Because, you know—I can't live up to it. I know it's her doing—bless her!—that old Parham's going to give me this thing. And it's a perfect scandal!'

'What nonsense, William!'

'It is!' he maintained, springing up, and standing before her, with his hands in his pockets. 'They're going to offer me the Under-Secretaryship for Foreign Affairs, and I shall take it, I suppose, and be thankful. And do you know'— he dropped out the words with emphasis—'that I don't a know a word of German—and I can't talk to a Frenchman for half an hour without disgracing myself. There—that's how we're governed!'

He stood staring at her with his bright large eyes—amused, yet strangely detached,—as though he had very little to do with what he was talking about.

Mary Lyster met his look in some bewilderment, conscious all the time that his neighbourhood was very agreeable and stirring.

'But everyone says—you speak so well on foreign subjects.'

'Well, any fool can get up a Blue Book. Only—luckily for me—all the fools don't. That's how I've scored sometimes. Oh! I don't deny that,—I've scored!' He thrust his hands deeper into his pockets, his whole tall frame vibrant, as it seemed to her, with will and good-humour.

'And you'll score again,' she said, smiling. 'You've got a wonderful opportunity, William. That's what the Bishop says.'

'Much obliged to him!'

Ashe looked down upon her rather oddly.

'He told me he had never believed you were such an idler as other people thought you—that he felt sure you had great endowments, and that you would use them for the good of your country, and'—she hesitated slightly—'of the Church. I wish you'd talk to him sometimes, William. He sees so clearly.'

'Oh! does he?' said Ashe.

Mary had dropped her work, and her face—a little too broad, with features a trifle too strongly marked—was

raised towards him. Its pale colour had passed into a slight blush. But the more strenuous expression had somehow not added to her charm, and her voice had taken a slightly nasal tone.

Through the mind of William Ashe, as he stood looking down upon her, passed a multitude of flying impressions. He knew perfectly well that Mary Lyster was one of the maidens whom it would be possible for him to marry. His mother had never pressed her upon him, but she would certainly acquiesce. It would have been mere mock modesty on his part not to guess that Mary would probably not refuse him. And she was handsome, well-provided, well-connected—oppressively so, indeed; a man might quail a little before her relations. Moreover, she and he had always been good friends, even when as a boy he could not refrain from teasing her for a slow-coach. During his electoral weeks in the country the thought of 'Polly' had often stolen kindly upon his rare moments of peace. He must marry, of course. There was no particular excitement or romance about it. Now that his elder brother was dead, and he had become the heir, it simply had to be done. And Polly was very nice,—quite sweet-tempered and intelligent. She looked well, moved well, would fill the position admirably.

Then, suddenly, as these half-thoughts rushed through his brain, a breath of something cold and distracting—a wind from the land of *ennui*—seemed to blow upon them and scatter them. Was it the mention of the Bishop—tiresome, pompous fellow—or her slightly pedantic tone—or the infinitesimal hint of 'management' that her speech implied. Who knows? But in that moment perhaps the scales of life inclined.

'Much obliged to the Bishop,' he repeated, walking up and down. 'I am afraid, however, I don't take things as seriously as he does. Oh, I hope I shall behave decently—

but, good Lord, what a comedy it is! You know the sort of articles'—he turned towards her—'our papers will be writing to-morrow on my appointment. They'll make me out no end of a fine fellow—you'll see! And, of course, the real truth is, as you and I know perfectly well, that if it hadn't been for poor Freddie's death—and mother—and her dinners—and the chaps who come here—I might have whistled for anything of the sort. And then I go down to Ledmenham and stand as a Liberal, and get all the pious Radicals to work for me! It's a humbugging world—isn't it?'

He returned to the fireplace, and stood looking down upon her—grinning.

Mary had resumed her embroidery. She, too, was dimly conscious of something disappointing.

'Of course, if you choose to take it like that, you can,' she said rather tartly. 'Of course, everything can be made ridiculous.'

'Well, that's a blessing, anyway!' said Ashe, with his merry laugh. 'But look here, Mary, tell me about yourself. What have you been doing?—dancing—riding, eh?'

He threw himself down beside her, and began an elder-brotherly cross-examination, which lasted till Lady Tranmore returned and begged him to go at once to his father.

When he returned to the drawing-room, Ashe found his mother alone. It was growing dark, and she was sitting idle, her hands in her lap, waiting for him.

'I must be off, dear,' he said to her. 'You won't come down and see me take my seat?'

She shook her head.

'I think not. What did you think of your father?'

'I don't see much change,' he said, hesitating.

'No, he's much the same.'

'And you?' He slid down on the sofa beside her, and threw his arm round her. 'Have you been fretting?'

Lady Tranmore made no reply. She was a self-contained woman, not readily moved to tears. But he felt her hand tremble as he pressed it.

'I shan't fret now'—she said after a moment—'now that you've come back.'

Ashe's face took a very soft and tender expression.

'Mother, you know—you think a great deal too much of me,—you're too ambitious for me.'

She gave a sound between a laugh and a sob, and, raising her hands, she smoothed back his curly hair and held his face between them.

'When do you see Lord Parham?' she asked.

'Eight o'clock—in his room at the House. I'll send you up a note.'

'You'll be home early?'

'No—don't wait for me.'

She dropped her hands, after giving him a kiss on the cheek.

'I know where you're going! It's Madame d'Estrées' evening.'

'Well—you don't object?'

'Object?' She shrugged her shoulders. 'So long as it amuses you— You won't find *one* woman there to-night.'

'Last time there were two,' he said, smiling, as he rose from the sofa.

'I know—Lady Quantock—and Mrs. Mallory. Now they've deserted her, I hear. What fresh gossip has turned up I don't know. Of course,' she sighed, 'I've been out of the world. But I believe there have been developments.'

'Well, I don't know anything about it—and I don't think I want to know. She's very agreeable, and one meets everybody there.'

'*Everybody*. Ungallant creature!' she said, giving a little pull to his collar, the set of which did not please her.

'Sorry! Mother!'—his laughing eyes pursued her—'Do you want to marry me off directly?—I know you do!'

'I want nothing but what you yourself should want. Of course you must marry.'

'The young women don't care twopence about me!

'William!—be a bear if you like, but not an idiot!'

'Perfectly true,' he declared; 'not the dazzlers, and the high-fliers any way,—the only ones it would be an excitement to carry off.'

'You know very well,' she said slowly, 'that now you might marry anybody.'

He threw his head back rather haughtily.

'Oh! I wasn't thinking about money, and that kind of thing. Well, give me time, mother—don't hurry me! And now I'd better stop talking nonsense, change my clothes, and be off. Good-bye, dear—you shall hear when the job's perpetrated!'

'William, really!—don't say these things—at least to anybody but me. You understand very well,'—she drew herself up rather finely—'that if I hadn't known, in spite of your apparent idleness, you would do any work they *set* you to do, to your own credit and the country's, I'd never have lifted a finger for you!'

William Ashe laughed out.

'Oh! intriguing mother!' he said, stooping again to kiss her—'So you admit you did it?'

He went off gaily, and she heard him flying upstairs three steps at a time, as though he were still an untamed Eton boy, and there were no three weeks' hard political fighting behind him, and no interview which might decide his life before him.

He entered his own sitting-room on the second floor, shut the door behind him, and glanced round him with

delight. It was a large room looking on a side street, and obliquely to the park. Its walls were covered with books—books which almost at first sight betrayed to the accustomed eye that they were the familiar companions of a student. Almost every volume had long paper slips inside it, and when opened would have been found to contain notes and underlinings in a somewhat reckless and destructive abundance. A large table, also loaded untidily with books and papers, stood in the centre of the room; many of them were notebooks, stored with evidences of the most laborious and patient work; a Cambridge text lay beside them face downwards, as he had left it on departure. His mother's housekeeper, who had been one of his best friends from babyhood, was the only person allowed to dust his room,—but on the strict condition that she replaced everything as she found it.

He took up the volume, and plunged a moment headlong into the Greek chorus that met his eye. '*Jolly!*' he said, putting it down with a sigh of regret. 'These beastly politics!'

And he went muttering to his dressing-room, summoning his valet almost with ill-temper. Yet half his library was the library of a politician, admirably chosen and exhaustively read.

The footman who answered his call understood his moods and served him at a look. Ashe complained hotly of the brushing of his dress-clothes, and worked himself into a fever over the set of his tie. Nevertheless, before he left he had managed to get from the young man the whole story of his engagement to the under-housemaid, giving him thereupon some bits of advice, jocular but trenchant, which James accepted with a readiness quite unlike his normal behaviour in the circles of his class.

CHAPTER II

Ashe took his seat, dined, and saw the Prime Minister. These things took time, and it was not till past eleven that he presented himself in the hall of Madame d'Estrées' house in St. James's Place. Most of her guests were already gathered, but he mounted the stairs together with an old friend and an old acquaintance, Philip Darrell, one of the ablest writers of the moment, and Louis Harman, artist and man of fashion, the friend of duchesses and painter of portraits, a person much in request in many worlds.

'What a *cachet* they have, these houses!' said Harman, looking round him. 'St. James's Place is the top!'

'Where else would you expect to find Madame d'Estrées?' asked Darrell, smiling.

'Yes,—what taste she has! However, it was I really who advised her to take the house.'

'Naturally,' said Darrell.

Harman threw a dubious look at him, then stopped a moment, and with a complacent proprietary air straightened an engraving on the staircase wall.

'I suppose the dear lady has a hundred slaves of the lamp as usual,' said Ashe. 'You advise her about her house—somebody else helps her to buy her wine——'

'Not at all, my dear fellow,' said Harman, offended,—'as if I couldn't do that!'

'Hullo!' said Darrell, as they neared the drawing-room door. 'What a crowd there is!'

For as the butler announced them, the din of talk which burst through the door implied indeed a multitude—much at their ease.

They made their way in with difficulty, shaping their course towards that corner in the room where they knew they should find their hostess. Ashe was greeted on all sides with friendly words and congratulations, and a passage was opened for him to the famous 'blue sofa' where Madame d'Estrées sat enthroned.

She looked up with animation, broke off her talk with two elderly diplomats who seemed to have taken possession of her, and beckoned Ashe to a seat beside her.

'So you're in? Was it a hard fight?'

'A hard fight? Oh! no. One would have had to be a great fool not to get in.'

'They say you spoke very well. I suppose you promised them everything they wanted—from the Crown downwards?'

'Yes—all the usual harmless things,' said Ashe.

Madame d'Estrées laughed; then looked at him across the top of her fan.

'Well!—and what else?'

'You can't wait for your newspaper?' he said, smiling, after a moment's pause.

She shrugged her shoulders good-humouredly.

'Oh! I *know*—of course I know. Is it as good as you expected?'

'As good as——' The young man opened his mouth in wonder. 'What right had I to expect anything?'

'How modest! All the same they want you—and they're very glad to get you. But you can't save them.'

'That's not generally expected of Under-Secretaries, is it?'

'A good deal's expected of *you*. I talked to Lord Parham about you last night.'

William Ashe flushed a little.

'Did you! Very kind of you.'

'Not at all. I didn't flatter you in the least. Nor did he. But they're going to give you your chance!'

She bent forward and lightly patted the sleeve of his coat with the fingers of a very delicate hand. In this sympathetic aspect, Madame d'Estrées was no doubt exceedingly attractive. There were, of course, many people who were not moved by it; to whom it was the conjuring of an arch-pretender. But these were generally of the female sex. Men, at any rate, lent themselves to the illusion. Ashe, certainly, had always done so. And to-night the spell still worked; though as her action drew his particular attention to her face and expression, he was aware of slight changes in her which recalled his mother's words of the afternoon. The eyes were tired; at last he perceived in them some slight signs of years and harass. Up till now her dominating charm had been a kind of timeless softness and sensuousness, which breathed from her whole personality—from her fair skin and hair, her large smiling eyes. She put, as it were, the question of age aside. It was difficult to think of her as a child; it had been impossible to imagine her as an old woman.

'Well, this is all very surprising,' said Ashe, 'considering that four months ago I did not matter an old shoe to anybody.'

'That was your own fault. You took no trouble. And besides—there was your poor brother in the way.'

Ashe's brow contracted.

'No, that he never was,' he said with energy. 'Freddy was never in anybody's way,—least of all in mine.'

'You know what I mean,'—she said, hastily. 'And you know what friends he and I were,—poor Freddy! But after all the world's the world.'

'Yes—we all grow on somebody's grave,' said Ashe. Then, just as she became conscious that she had jarred upon him, and must find a new opening, he himself found it. 'Tell me!'—he said, bending forward with a sudden alertness—'who is that lady?'

He pointed out a little figure in white, sitting in the opening of the second drawing-room; a very young girl apparently, surrounded by a group of men.

'Ah!' said Madame d'Estrées—'I was coming to that—that's my girl Kitty——'

'Lady Kitty!' said Ashe in amazement—'She's left school? I thought she was quite a little thing.'

'She's eighteen. Isn't she a darling? Don't you think her very pretty?'

Ashe looked a moment.

'Extraordinarily bewitching!—unlike other people?' he said, turning to the mother.

Madame d'Estrées raised her eyebrows a little, in apparent amusement.

'I'm not going to describe Kitty. She's indescribable. Besides—you must find her out. Do go and talk to her. She's to be half with me, half with her aunt—Lady Grosville.'

Ashe made some polite comment.

'Oh! don't let's be conventional!' said Madame d'Estrées, flirting her fan with a little air of weariness—'It's an odious arrangement. Lady Grosville and I, as you probably know, are not on terms. She says atrocious things of me,—and I'—the fair head fell back a little, and the white shoulders rose, with the slightest air of

languid disdain,—'well, bear me witness that I don't retaliate! It's not worth while. But I know that Grosville House can help Kitty. So!——' Her gesture, half ironical, half resigned, completed the sentence.

'Does Lady Kitty like society?'

'Kitty likes anything that flatters or excites her.'

'Then of course she likes society. Anybody as pretty as that——'

'Ah! how sweet of you'—said Madame d'Estrées softly,—'how sweet of you! I like you to think her pretty. I like you to say so.'

Ashe felt and looked a trifle disconcerted, but his companion bent forward and added—'I don't know whether I want you to flirt with her!—You must take care. Kitty's the most fantastic creature. Oh! my life now'll be very different. I find she takes all my thoughts and most of my time!'

There was something extravagant in the sweetness of the smile which emphasised the speech, and altogether, Madame d'Estrées, in this new maternal aspect, was not as agreeable as usual. Part of her charm perhaps had always lain in the fact that she had no domestic topics of her own, and so was endlessly ready for those of other people. Those, indeed, who came often to her house were accustomed to speak warmly of her 'unselfishness'—by which they meant the easy patience with which she could listen, smile, and flatter.

Perhaps Ashe made this tacit demand upon her, no less than other people. At any rate, as she talked cooingly on about her daughter, he would have found her tiresome for once, but for some arresting quality in that small, distant figure. As it was, he followed what she said with attention, and as soon as she had been recaptured by the impatient Italian Ambassador, he moved off, intending slowly to make his way to Lady Kitty. But he was

caught in many congratulations by the road, and presently he saw that his friend Darrell was being introduced to her by the old habitué of the house, Colonel Warington, who generally divided with the hostess the 'lead' of these social evenings.

Lady Kitty nodded carelessly to Mr. Darrell, and he sat down beside her.

'That's a cool hand for a girl of eighteen!' thought Ashe. 'She has the airs of a princess,—except for the chatter.'

Chatter indeed! Wherever he moved the sound of the light hurrying voice made itself persistently heard through the hum of male conversation.

Yet once, Ashe, looking round to see if Darrell could be dislodged, caught the chatterer silent, and found himself all at once invaded by a slight thrill, or shock.

What did the girl's expression mean?—what was she thinking of? She was looking intently at the crowded room, and it seemed to Ashe that Darrell's talk, though his lips moved quickly, was not reaching her at all. The dark brows were drawn together, and beneath them the eyes looked sorely out. The delicate lips were slightly, piteously open, and the whole girlish form in its young beauty appeared, as he watched, to shrink together. Suddenly the girl's look, so wide and searching, caught that of Ashe; and he moved impulsively forward.

'Present me, please, to Lady Kitty,' he said, catching Warington's arm.

'Poor child!' said a low voice in his ear.

Ashe turned and saw Louis Harman. The tone, however—allusive, intimate, patronising—in which Harman had spoken, annoyed him, and he passed on without taking any notice.

'Lady Kitty,' said Warington, 'Mr. Ashe wishes to be presented to you. He is an old friend of your mother's. Congratulate him—he has just got into Parliament.'

Lady Kitty drew herself up, and all trace of the look which Ashe had observed disappeared. She bowed, not carelessly as she had bowed to Darrell, but with a kind of exaggerated stateliness, not less girlish.

'I never congratulate anybody'—she said, shaking her head,—'till I know them.'

Ashe opened his eyes a little.

'How long must I wait?' he said smiling, as he drew a chair beside her.

'That depends. Are you difficult to know?' She looked up at him audaciously, and he on his side could not take his eyes from her, so singular was the small sparkling face. The hair and skin were very fair, like her mother's, the eyes dark and full of fire, the neck most daintily white and slender, the figure undeveloped, the feet and hands extremely small. But what arrested him was, so to speak, the embodied contradiction of the personality—as between the wild intelligence of the eyes, and the extreme youth, almost childishness, of the rest.

He asked her if she had ever known anyone confess to being easy to know.

'Well, I'm easy to know,' she said carelessly,—leaning back, 'but then I'm not worth knowing.'

'Is one allowed to find out?'

'Oh yes—of course! Do you know—when you were over there, I *willed* that you should come and talk to me, and you came. Only,' she sat up with animation, and began to tick off her sentences on her fingers—'Don't ask me how long I've been in town. Don't ask where I was in Paris. Don't inquire whether I like balls! You see I warn you at once,'—she looked up frankly,—'that we mayn't lose time.'

'Well then, I don't see how I'm ever to find out,' said Ashe, stoutly.

'Whether I'm worth knowing?' She considered,

then bent forward eagerly. 'Look here!—I'll just tell you everything in a lump, and then that'll do—won't it? Listen. I'm just eighteen. I was sent to the Sœurs Blanches when I was thirteen—the year Papa died. I *didn't* like Papa,—I'm very sorry, but I didn't! However that's by the way.—In all those years I have only seen Maman once—she doesn't like children. But my aunt Grosville has some French relations—very, *very* "comme il faut" you understand—and I used to go and stay with them for the holidays. Tell me!—did you ever hunt in France?'

'Never,' said Ashe startled and amused by the sudden glance of enthusiasm that lit up the face, and expressed itself in the clasped hands.

'Oh! it's such heaven,' she said, lifting her shoulders with an extravagant gesture,—'such *heaven*! First there are the old dresses—the men look such darlings!—and then the horns, and the old ways they have—*si noble*!—*si distingué*!—not like your stupid English hunting. And then the dogs!—Ah! the *dogs*'—the shoulders went higher still,—'do you know my cousin Henri actually gave me a puppy of the great breed,—*the* breed, you know—the Dogs of Saint Hubert. Or at least he *would*, if Maman would have let me bring it over. And she wouldn't! Just think of that!—When there are thousands of people in France who'd give the eyes out of their head for one. I cried all one night—Allons!—faut pas y penser!'—she shook back the hair from her eyes with an impatient gesture. 'My cousins have got a château, you know, in the Seine et Oise. They've promised to ask me next year—when the Grand Duke Paul comes—if I'll promise to behave. You see, I'm not a bit like French girls—I had so many affairs!'

Her eyes flashed with laughter.

Ashe laughed too.

'Are you going to tell me about them also?'

She drew herself up—

'No! I play fair always,—ask anybody!—Oh! I *do* want to go back to France so badly!'—Once more she was all appeal and childishness. 'Anyway, I won't stay in England!—I have made up my mind to that!'

'How long has it taken?'

'A fortnight,' she said slowly,—'just a fortnight.'

'That hardly seems time enough—does it?'—said Ashe. 'Give us a little longer!'

'No—I—I hate you!' said Lady Kitty, with a strange drop in her voice. Her little fingers began to drum on the table near her, and to Ashe's intense astonishment he saw her eyes fill with tears.

Suddenly a movement towards the other room set in around them. Madame d'Estrées could be heard giving directions. A space was made in the large drawing-room—a little table appeared in it, and a footman placed thereon a glass of water.

Lady Kitty looked up.

'Oh! that *detestable* man!' she said, drawing back. 'No—I can't, I can't bear it. Come with me!' and beckoning to Ashe she fled with precipitation into the further part of the inner drawing-room, out of her mother's sight. Ashe followed her, and she dropped panting and elate into a chair.

Meanwhile the outer room gathered to hear the recitation of some *vers de société*, fondly believed by their author to be of a very pretty and Praedian make. They certainly amused the company, who laughed and clapped as each neat personality emerged. Lady Kitty passed the time either in a running commentary on the reciter, which occasionally convulsed her companion, or else in holding her small hands over her ears.

When it was over, she drew a long breath.

'How Maman *can*!—Oh! how *bête* you English are

to applaud such a man! You have only *one* poet haven't you?—one living poet? Ah! I shouldn't have laughed if it had been he!'

'I suppose you mean Geoffry Cliffe?' said Ashe, amused. 'Nobody abroad seems ever to have heard of any one else.'

'Well, of course, I just long to know him! Everyone says he is so dangerous!—he makes all the women fall in love with him. That's *delicious*! He shouldn't make me! Do you know him?'

'I knew him at Eton. We were "swished" together,' said Ashe.

She inquired what the phrase might mean, and when informed, flushed hotly, denouncing the English school system, as quite unfit for gentlemen and men of honour. Her French cousins would sooner die than suffer such a thing. Then in the midst of her tirade she suddenly paused and fixing Ashe with her brilliant eyes, she asked him a surprising question, in a changed and steady voice.

'Is Lady Tranmore not well?'

Ashe was fairly startled.

'Thank you,—I left her quite well. Have you——'

'Did Maman ask her to come to-night?'

It was Ashe's turn to redden.

'I don't know. But—we are in mourning, you see, for my brother.'

Her face changed and softened instantly.

'Are you? I'm so sorry. I—I always say something stupid. Then—Lady Tranmore used to come to Maman's parties—before——'

She had grown quite pale; it seemed to him that her hand shook. Ashe felt an extraordinary pang of pity and concern.

'It's I, you see, to whom your mother has been kind,'

he said gently. 'We're an independent family; we each make our own friends.'

'No—' she said, drawing a deep breath. 'No, it's not that. Look at that room.'

Following her slight gesture, Ashe looked. It was an old low-ceiled room, panelled in white and gold, showing here and there an Italian picture,—Saint, or Holy Family, agreeable school-work,—from which might be inferred the taste if not the *expertise* of Madame d'Estrées' first husband, Lord Blackwater. The floor was held by a plentiful collection of seats, neither too easy, nor too stiff; arranged by one who understood to perfection the physical conditions at least which should surround the 'great art' of conversation. At this moment every seat was full. A sea of black coats overflowed on the further side, into the staircase landing, where through the open door several standing groups could be seen; and in the inner room where they sat, there was but little space between its margin and themselves. It was a remarkable sight; and in his past visits to the house Ashe had often said to himself that the elements of which it was made up were still more remarkable. Ministers, and Opposition; ambassadors, travellers, journalists; the men of fashion and the men of reform; here, a French Republican official, and beyond him, perhaps, a man whose ancestors were already of the most ancient *noblesse* in Saint-Simon's day; artists, great and small, men of letters good and indifferent; all these had been among the guests of Madame d'Estrées, brought to the house, each of them, for some quality's sake, some power of keeping up the social game.

But now, as he looked at the room, not to please himself, but to obey Lady Kitty, Ashe became aware of a new impression. The crowd was no less, numerically, than he had seen it in the early winter; but it seemed to him less distinguished, made up of coarser and commoner

items. He caught the face of a shady financier long since banished from Lady Tranmore's parties; beyond him, a red-faced Colonel, conspicuous alike for doubtful money-matters and matrimonial trouble; and in a further corner, the sallow profile of a writer, whose books were apt to rouse even the man of the world to a healthy and contemptuous disgust. Surely these persons had never been there of old; he could not remember one of them.

He looked again, more closely. Was it fancy, or was the gathering itself aware of the change which had passed over it? As a whole, it was certainly noisier than of old; the shouting and laughter were incessant. But within the general uproar certain groups had separated from other groups, and were talking with a studied quiet. Most of the habitués were still there; but they held themselves apart from their neighbours. Were the old intimacy and solidarity beginning to break up?—and with them the peculiar charm of these 'evenings,' a charm which had so far defied a social boycott that had been active from the first?

He glanced back uncertainly at Lady Kitty, and she looked at him.

'Why are there no ladies?' she said, abruptly.

He collected his thoughts.

'It—it has always been a men's gathering. Perhaps for some men here—I'm sorry there are such barbarians, Lady Kitty!—that makes the charm of it. Look at that old fellow there!—He is a most famous old boy. Everybody invites him—but he never stirs out of his den but to come here. My mother can't get him—though she has tried often.'

And he pointed to a dishevelled grey-haired gentleman, short in stature, round in figure, something in short like an animated egg, who was addressing a group not far off.

Lady Kitty's face showed a variety of expressions.

'Are there many parties like this in London? Are the ladies asked, and don't come? I—I don't—understand!'

Ashe looked at her kindly.

'There is no other hostess in London as clever as your mother,' he declared, and then tried to change the subject; but she paid no heed.

'The other day, at Aunt Grosville's,' she said slowly, 'I asked if my two cousins might come to-night, and they looked at me, as though I were mad! Oh *do* talk to me!—' She came impulsively nearer, and Ashe noticed that Darrell, standing against the doorway of communication, looked round at them in amusement. 'I liked your face—the very first moment when I saw you across the room. Do you know,—you're—you're very handsome!'—She drew back, her eyes fixed gravely, intently upon him.

For the first time Ashe was conscious of annoyance.

'I hope you won't mind my saying so,'—his tone was a little short,—'but in this country we don't say those things. They're not—quite polite.'

'Aren't they?' Her eyebrows arched themselves and her lips fell in penitence. 'I always called my French cousin, Henri la Fresnay, *beau*! I am sure he liked it!' The accent was almost plaintive.

Ashe's natural impulse was to say that if so the French cousin must be an ass. But all in a moment he found himself seized with a desire to take her little hands in his own, and press them,—she looked such a child, so exquisite, and so forlorn. And he did in fact bend forward confidentially;—forgetting Darrell.

'I want you to come and see my mother?' he said, smiling at her. 'Ask Lady Grosville to bring you.'

'May I? But——' She searched his face, eager still to pour out the impulsive, uncontrolled confidences that

were in her mind. But his expression stopped her, and she gave a little resentful sigh.

'Yes—I'll come. *We*—you and I—are a little bit cousins too—aren't we? We talked about you at the Grosvilles.'

'Was our "great-great" the same person?' he said laughing. 'Hope it was a decent "great-great." Some of mine aren't much to boast of. Well, at any rate, let's *be* cousins—whether we are or no, shall we?'

She assented, her whole face lighting up.

'And we're going to meet—the week after next!' she said triumphantly,—'in the country.'

'Are we?—at Grosville Park. That's delightful.'

'And *then* I'll ask your advice—I'll make you tell me —a hundred things! That's a bargain—mind!'

'Kitty!—Come and help me with tea—there's a darling!'

Lady Kitty turned. A path had opened through the crowd, and Madame d'Estrées, much escorted, a vision of diamonds and pale pink satin, appeared, leading the way to the supper-room, and the light 'refection,' accompanied by much champagne, which always closed these evenings.

The girl rose, as did her companion also. Madame d'Estrées threw a quick half-satirical glance at Ashe, but he had eyes only for Lady Kitty, and her transformation at the touch of her mother's voice. She followed Madame d'Estrées with a singular and conscious dignity, her white skirts sweeping, her delicately fine head thrown back on her thin neck and shoulders. The black crowd closed about her; and Ashe's eyes pursued the slender figure till it disappeared.

Extreme youth—innocence—protest—pain:—was it with these touching and pleading impressions, after all, that his first talk with Kitty Bristol had left him? Yet what a little *étourdie*! How lacking in the reserves, the

natural instincts and shrinkings of the well-bred English girl!

Darrell and Ashe walked home together, through a windy night which was bringing out April scents even from the London grass and lilac-bushes.

'Well——' said Darrell, as they stepped into the Green Park,—'So you're safely in. Congratulate you, old fellow. Anything else?'

'Yes. They've offered me Hickson's place. More fools they, don't you think?'

'Good! Upon my word, Bill, you've got your foot in the stirrup now! Hope you'll continue to be civil to poor devils like me.'

The speaker looked up smiling, but neither the tone nor the smile were really cordial. Ashe felt the embarrassment that he had once or twice felt before in telling Darrell news of good fortune. There seemed to be something in Darrell that resented it,—under an outer show of felicitation.

However, they went on talking of the political moment and its prospects, and of Ashe's personal affairs. As to the last, Darrell questioned, and Ashe somewhat reluctantly replied. It appeared that his allowance was to be largely raised, that his paralysed father, in fact, was anxious to put him in possession of a substantial share in the income of the estates,—that one of the country-houses was to be made over to him—and so on.

'Which means, of course, that they want you to marry,' said Darrell. 'Well, you've only to throw the handkerchief.'

They were passing a lamp as he spoke, and the light shone on his long pale face,—a face of discontent—with its large sunken eyes and hollow cheeks.

Ashe treated the remark as 'rot,' and endeavoured to

get away from his own affairs, by discussing the party they had just left.

'How does she get all those people together? It's astonishing!'

'Well, I always liked Madame d'Estrées well enough,' said Darrell,—'but, upon my word, she has done a beastly mean thing in bringing that girl over.'

'You mean?'—Ashe hesitated,—'that her own position is too doubtful?'

'Doubtful!—my dear fellow!'—Darrell laughed unpleasantly. 'I never really understood what it all meant till the other night when old Lady Grosville took and told me,—more at any rate than I knew before. The Grosvilles are on the war path, and they regard the coming of this poor child as the last straw.'

'Why?' said Ashe.

Darrell gave a shrug. 'Well, you know the story of Madame d'Estrées' step-daughter?—old Blackwater's daughter.'

'Ah! by his first marriage? I knew it was something about the step-daughter,' said Ashe vaguely.

Darrell began to repeat his conversation with Lady Grosville. The tale threatened presently to become a black one indeed; and at last Ashe stood still in the broad walk crossing the Green Park.

'Look here,' he said resolutely—'don't tell me any more. I don't want to hear any more.'

'Why?' asked Darrell in amazement.

'Because'—Ashe hesitated a moment. 'Well, I don't want it to be made impossible for me to go to Madame d'Estrées' again. Besides—we've just eaten her salt!'

'You're a good friend!' said Darrell, not without something of a sneer.

Ashe was ruffled by the tone, but tried not to show it. He merely insisted that he knew Lady Grosville to be

a bit of an old cat; that of course there was something up; but it seemed a shame for those at least who accepted Madame d'Estrées' hospitality to believe the worst. There was a curious mixture of carelessness and delicacy in his remarks, very characteristic of the man. It appeared as though he was at once too indolent to go into the matter, and too chivalrous to talk about it.

Darrell presently maintained a rather angry silence. No man likes to be checked in his story, especially when the check implies something like a snub from his best friend. Suddenly, memory brought before him the little picture of Ashe and Lady Kitty together,—he bending over her, in his large handsome geniality, and she, looking up. Darrell felt a twinge of jealousy—then disgust. Really men like Ashe had the world too easily their own way! That they should pose, besides,—was too much.

CHAPTER III

RATHER more than a fortnight after the evening at Madame d'Estrées', William Ashe found himself in a Midland train on his way to the Cambridgeshire house of Lady Grosville. While the April country slipped past him—like some blanched face, to which life and colour are returning—Ashe divided his time between an idle skimming of the Saturday papers, and a no less idle dreaming of Kitty Bristol. He had seen her two or three times since his first introduction to her. Once at a ball to which Lady Grosville had taken her, and once on the terrace of the House of Commons, where he had strolled up and down with her for a most amusing and stimulating hour, while her mother entertained a group of elderly politicians. And the following day she had come alone,—her own choice—to take tea with Lady Tranmore, on that lady's invitation, as prompted by her son. Ashe himself had arrived towards the end of the visit, and had found a Lady Kitty in the height of the fashion, stiff, mannered, and flushed to a deep red by her own consciousness that she could not possibly be making a good impression. At sight of him she relaxed, and talked a great deal, but not wisely; and when she was gone, Ashe could get very little opinion of any kind from his mother, who had however expressed a wish that she should come and visit them in the country.

Since then he frankly confessed to himself that in the intervals of his new official and administrative work he had been a good deal haunted by memories of this strange

child, her eyes, her grace,—even in her fits of proud shyness,—and the way in which, as he had put her into her cab after the visit to Lady Tranmore, her tiny hand had lingered in his, a mute astonishing appeal. Haunted, too, by what he heard of her fortunes and surroundings. What was the real truth of Madame d'Estrées' situation? During the preceding weeks some ugly rumours had reached Ashe of financial embarrassment in that quarter, of debts risen to mountainous height, of crisis and possible disappearance. Then these rumours were met by others, to the effect that Colonel Warington, the old friend and support of the D'Estrées' household, had come to the rescue, that the crisis had been averted, and that the three weekly evenings, so well known, and so well attended, would go on; and with this phase of the story, there mingled, as Ashe was well aware, not the slightest breath of scandal, in a case where, so to speak, all was scandal.

And meanwhile what new and dolorous truths had Lady Kitty been learning, as to her mother's history, and her mother's position? By Jove, it *was* hard upon the girl!—Darrell was right. Why not leave her to her French friends and relations?—or relinquish her to Lady Grosville? Madame d'Estrées had seen little or nothing of her for years. She could not, therefore, be necessary to her mother's happiness, and there was a real cruelty in thus claiming her, at the very moment of her entrance into society, where Madame d'Estrées could only stand in her way. For although many a man whom the girl might profitably marry was to be found among the mother's guests, the influences of Madame d'Estrées' 'evenings' were certainly not matrimonial. Still the unforeseen was surely the probable in Lady Kitty's case. What sort of man ought she to marry?—what sort of man could safely take the risks of marrying her?—with that mother in the background?

He descended at the wayside station prescribed to him, and looked round him for fellow-guests—much as the card player examines his hand. Mary Lyster,—a Cabinet Minister, filling an ornamental office and handed on from ministry to ministry as a kind of necessary appendage, the public never knew why,—the Minister's second wife, an attaché from the Austrian Embassy, two members of Parliament, and a well-known journalist—Ashe said to himself flippantly that so far the trumps were not many. But he was always reasonably glad to see Mary, and he went up to her, cared for her bag, and made her put on her cloak, with cousinly civility. In the omnibus on the way to the house, he and Mary gossiped in a corner, while the Cabinet Minister and the Editor went to sleep, and the two members of Parliament practised some courageous French on the Austrian attaché.

'Is it to be a large party?' he asked of his companion.

'Oh! they always fill the house. A good many came down yesterday.'

'Well, I'm not curious,' said Ashe—'except as to one person.'

'Who?'

'Lady Kitty Bristol.'

Mary Lyster smiled.

'Yes, poor child, I heard from the Grosville girls that she was to be here.'

'Why "poor child"?'

'I don't know. Quite the wrong expression I admit. It should be "poor hostess."'

'Oh!—the Grosvilles complain?'

'No. They're only on tenterhooks. They never know what she will do next.'

'How good for the Grosvilles!'

'You think society is the better for shocks?'

'Lady Grosville can do with them, any way. What a masterful woman! But I'll back Lady Kitty.'

'I haven't seen her yet,' said Mary. 'I hear she is a very odd-looking little thing.'

'Extremely pretty,' said Ashe.

'Really?' Mary lifted incredulous eyebrows. 'Well, now I shall know what you admire.'

'Oh, my tastes are horribly catholic,—I admire so many people,' said Ashe with a glance at the well-dressed elegance beside him. Mary coloured a little—unseen; and the rattle of the carriage as it entered the covered porch of Grosville Park, cut short their conversation.

'Well, I'm glad you got in,' said Lady Grosville, in her full loud voice, 'because we are connections. But of course I regard the loss of a seat to our side just now as a great disaster.'

'Very grasping, on your part!' said Ashe. 'You've had it all your own way lately. Think of Portsmouth!'

Lady Grosville, however, as she met his bantering look, did not find herself at all inclined to think of Portsmouth. She was much more inclined to think of William Ashe. What a good-looking fellow he had grown! She heaved an inward sigh, of mingled envy and appreciation, —directed towards Lady Tranmore.

Poor Susan indeed had suffered terribly in the death of her eldest son. But the handsomer and abler of the two brothers still remained to her,—and the estate was safe. Lady Grosville thought of her own three daughters, plain and almost dowerless; and of that conceited young man, the heir, whom she could hardly persuade her husband to invite, once a year, for appearance's sake.

'Why are we so early?'—said Ashe looking at his watch. 'I thought I should be disgracefully late.'

For he and Lady Grosville had the library to themselves. It was a fine book-walled room, with giallo antico columns and Adam decoration; and in its richly coloured lamp-lit space, the seated figure—stiffly erect—of Lady Grosville, her profile, said by some to be like a horse and by others to resemble Savonarola, the cap of old Venice point that crowned her grizzled hair, her black velvet dress, and the long-fingered ugly, yet distinguished hands, which lay upon her lap, told significantly; especially when contrasted with the negligent ease and fresh-coloured youth of her companion.

Grosville Park was rich in second-rate antiques; and there was a Greco-Roman head above the bookcase with which Ashe had been often compared. As he stood now leaning against the fire-place, the close-piled curls, and eyes—somewhat 'à fleur de tête'—of the bust were undoubtedly repeated with some closeness in the living man. Those whom he had offended by some social carelessness or other said of him when they wished to run him down that he was 'floridly' handsome; and there was some truth in it.

'Didn't you get the message about dinner?' said Lady Grosville. Then, as he shook his head,—'very remiss of Parkin. I always tell him he loses his head directly the party goes into double figures. We had to put off dinner a quarter of an hour, because of Kitty Bristol, who missed her train at St. Pancras, and only arrived half an hour ago. By the way, I suppose you have already seen her—at that woman's?'

'I met her a week or two ago, at Madame d'Estrées',' said Ashe, apparently preoccupied with something wrong in the set of his white waistcoat.

'What did you think of her?'

'A charming young lady,' said Ashe smiling. 'What else should I think?'

'A lamb thrown to the wolves,' said Lady Grosville, grimly. 'How that woman *could* do such a thing!'

'I saw nothing lamb-like about Lady Kitty,' said Ashe. 'And do you include me among the wolves?'

Lady Grosville hesitated a moment, then stuck to her colours.

'You shouldn't go to such a house,' she said boldly,—'I suppose I may say that without offence, William, as I've known you from a boy.'

'Say anything you like, my dear Lady Grosville! So you—believe evil things—of Madame d'Estreés?'

His tone was light, but his eyes sought the distant door, as though invoking some fellow guest to appear and protect him.

Lady Grosville did not answer. Ashe's look returned to her, and he was startled by the expression of her face. He had always known and unwillingly admired her for a fine Old Testament Christian,—one from whom the language of the imprecatory Psalms with regard to her enemies, personal and political, might have flowed more naturally than from any other person he knew, of the same class and breeding. But this loathing—this passion of contempt—this heat of memory!—these were new indeed, and the fire of them transfigured the old grey face.

'I have known a fair number of bad people,' said Lady Grosville in a low voice,—'and a good many wicked women. But for meanness and vileness combined, the things I know of the woman who was Blackwater's wife, have no equal in my experience!'

There was a moment's pause. Then Ashe said, in a voice as serious as her own—

'I am sorry to hear you say that,—partly because I like Madame d'Estrées, and partly—because—I was particularly attracted by Lady Kitty.'

Lady Grosville looked up sharply. 'Don't marry her, William!—don't marry her! She comes of a bad stock.'

Ashe recovered his gaiety.

'She is your own niece. Mightn't a man dare?—on that guarantee?'

'Not at all,—' said Lady Grosville, unappeased. 'I was a hop out of kin. Besides—a Methodist governess saved me; she converted me, at eighteen, and I owe her everything. But my brothers!—and all the rest of us!'—She threw up her eyes and hands. 'What's the good of being mealy-mouthed about it? All the world knows it. A good many of us were mad,—and I sometimes think I see more than eccentricity in Kitty.'

'Who was Madame d'Estrées?' said Ashe. Why should he wince so at the girl's name?—in that hard mouth!

Lady Grosville smiled.

'Well, I can tell you a good deal about that,' she said. 'Ah!—another time!'

For the door opened, and in came a group of guests, with a gush of talk, and a rustling of silks and satins.

Everybody was gathered; dinner had been announced; and the white-haired and gouty Lord Grosville was in a state of seething impatience that not even the mild-voiced Dean of the neighbouring Cathedral, engaged in complimenting him on his speech at the Diocesan Conference, could restrain.

'Adelina, need we wait any longer?' said the master of the house, turning an angry eye upon his wife.

'Certainly not,—she has had ample time,' said Lady Grosville, and rang the bell beside her.

Suddenly there was a whirlwind of noise in the hall,—the angry barking of a small dog, the sound of a girl's voice laughing and scolding, the swish of silk skirts. A

scandalised butler, obeying Lady Grosville's summons, threw the door open; and in burst Lady Kitty.

'Oh! I'm so sorry,' said the new comer in a tone of despair. 'But I couldn't leave him upstairs, Aunt Lina! He'd eaten one of my shoes, and begun upon the other. And Julie's afraid of him. He bit her last week. *May* he sit on my knee? I know I can keep him quiet!

Every conversation in the library stopped. Twenty amazed persons turned to look. They beheld a slim girl in white at the far end of the large room struggling with a grey terrier puppy which she held under her left arm, and turning appealing eyes towards Lady Grosville. The dog, half frightened, half fierce, was barking furiously. Lady Kitty's voice could hardly be heard through the din, and she was crimson with the effort to control her charge. Her lips laughed; her eyes implored. And to add to the effect of the apparition, a marked strangeness of dress was at once perceived by all the English eyes turned upon her. Lady Kitty was robed in the extreme of French fashion, which at that moment was a fashion of flounces; she was much *décolletée*; and her fair abundant hair, carried to a great height and arranged with a certain calculated wildness around her small face, was surmounted by a large scarlet butterfly which shone defiantly against the dark background of books.

'Kitty!' said Lady Grosville, advancing indignantly, 'what a dreadful noise! Pray give the dog to Parkin at once.'

Lady Kitty only held the struggling animal tighter.

'*Please*, Aunt Lina!—I'm afraid he'll bite! But he'll be quite good with me.'

'Why *did* you bring him, Kitty? We can't have such a creature at dinner!' said Lady Grosville angrily.

Lord Grosville advanced behind his wife.

'How do you do, Kitty? Hadn't you better put down the dog, and come and be introduced to Mr. Rankine who is to take you in to dinner?'

'A SLIM GIRL IN WHITE AT THE FAR END OF THE LARGE ROOM'

Lady Kitty shook her fair head, but advanced, still clinging to the dog, gave a smile and a nod to Ashe, and a bow to the young Tory member presented to her.

'You don't mind him?' she said, a flash of laughter in her dark eyes—'We'll manage him between us, won't we?'

The young man, dazzled by her prettiness and her strangeness, murmured a hopeful assent. Lord Grosville, with the air of a man determined on dinner though the skies fall, offered his arm to Lady Edith Manley, the wife of the Cabinet Minister, and made for the dining-room. The stream of guests followed; when suddenly, the puppy, perceiving on the floor a ball of wool which had rolled out of Lady Grosville's work-table, escaped in an ecstasy of mischief from his mistress's arm, and flew upon the ball. Kitty rushed after him; the wool first unrolled, then caught; the table overturned and all its contents were flung pell-mell in the path of Lady Grosville, who, on the arm of the amused and astonished Minister, was waiting in restrained fury, till her guests should pass.

'I shall never get over this,' said Lady Kitty, as she leant back in her chair, still panting, and quite incapable of eating any of the foods that were being offered to her in quick succession.

'I don't know that you deserve to,' said Ashe, turning a face upon her which was as grave as he could make it. The attention of everyone else round the room was also in truth occupied with his companion. There was indeed a general buzz of conversation, and a general pretence that Lady Kitty's proceedings might now be ignored. But in reality every guest, male or female, kept a stealthy watch on the red butterfly and the sparkling face beneath it; and Ashe was well aware of it.

'I vow it was not my fault,' said Kitty, with dignity. 'I was not allowed to have the dog I should have had.

You'd never have found a dog of St. Hubert condescending to bedroom slippers! But as I had to have a dog—and Colonel Warington gave me this one three days ago—and he has already ruined half maman's things, and no one could manage him but me, I just had to bring him, and trust to Providence.'

'I have been here a good many times,' said Ashe, 'and I never yet saw a dog in the sanctuary. Do you know that Pitt once wrote a speech in the Library?'

'Did he? I'm sure it never made such a stir as Ponto did.' Kitty's face suddenly broke into laughter, and she hid it a moment in her hands.

'You brazen it out,' said Ashe, 'but how are you going to appease Lady Grosville?'

Kitty ceased to laugh. She drew herself up, and looked seriously, observantly at her aunt.

'I don't know. But I must do it somehow. I don't want any more worries.'

So changed was her tone and aspect that Ashe turned a friendly examining look upon her.

'Have you been worried?' he said in a lower voice.

She shrugged her shoulders, and made no reply. But presently she impatiently reclaimed his attention, snatching him from the lady he had taken in to dinner, with no scruple at all.

'Will you come a walk with me to-morrow morning?'

'Proud,' said Ashe,—'what time?'

'As soon as we can get rid of these people,' she said, her eye running round the table. Then as it paused and lingered on the face of Mary Lyster opposite, she abruptly asked him who that lady might be.

Ashe informed her.

'Your cousin?' she said, looking at him with a slight frown. 'Your cousin? I don't—well, I don't think I shall like her.'

'That's a great pity,' said Ashe.

'For me?' she said, distrustfully.

'For both, of course! My mother's very fond of Miss Lyster. She's often with us.'

'Oh!' said Kitty, and looked again at the face opposite. Then he heard her say behind her fan—half to herself and half to him—

'She does not interest me in the least! She has no ideas!—I'm sure she has no ideas. Has she?'

She turned abruptly to Ashe.

'Every one calls her very clever.'

Kitty looked contempt.

'That's nothing to do with it. It's not the clever people who have ideas.'

Ashe bantered her a little on the meaning of her words, till he presently found that she was too young and unpractised to be able to take his thrusts and return them, with equanimity. She could make a daring sally or reply; but it was still the raw material of conversation; it wanted ease and polish. And she was evidently conscious of it herself, for presently her cheek flushed, and her manner wavered.

'I suppose you—everybody—thinks her very agreeable?' she said, sharply, her eyes returning to Miss Lyster.

'She is a most excellent gossip,' said Ashe. 'I always go to her for the news.'

Kitty glanced again.

'I can see that already she detests me.'

'In half an hour?'

The girl nodded.

'She has looked at me twice—about. But she has made up her mind—and she never changes.' Then with an abrupt alteration of note, she looked round the room. 'I suppose your English dining-rooms are all like this? One might be sitting in a hearse. And the pictures—no! *Quelles horreurs*!'

She raised her shoulders again impetuously, frowning

at a huge full-length opposite of Lord Grosville as M.F.H., a masterpiece indeed of early Victorian vulgarity.

Then suddenly, hastily,—with that flashing softness which so often transformed her expression, she turned towards him, trying to make amends.

'But the library—that was *bien*—ah! *tr-rès, tr-rès bien*!'

Her r's rolled a little as she spoke, with a charming effect, and she looked at him radiantly, as though to strike and to make amends were equally her prerogative, and she asked no man's leave.

'You've not yet seen what there is to see here,' said Ashe, smiling. 'Look behind you.'

The girl turned her slim neck,—and exclaimed. For behind Ashe's chair was the treasure of the house. It was a 'Dance of Children,' by one of the most famous of the eighteenth century masters. From the dark wall it shone out with a flower-like brilliance, a vision of colour and of grace. The children danced through a golden air, their bodies swaying to one of those 'unheard melodies' of art, sweeter than all mortal tunes; their delicate faces alive with joy. The sky and grass and trees seemed to caress them; a soft sunlight clothed them; and flowers brushed their feet.

Kitty turned back again, and was silent. Was it Ashe's fancy, or had she grown pale?

'Did you like it?' he asked her. She turned to him, and for the second time in their acquaintance he saw her eyes floating in tears.

'It is too beautiful!' she said with an effort—almost an angry effort. 'I don't want to see it again.'

'I thought it would give you pleasure,' said Ashe gently,—suddenly conscious of a hope that she was not aware of the slight look of amusement with which Mary Lyster was contemplating them both.

'So it did,' said Kitty, furtively applying her lace

handkerchief to her tears,—'but'—her voice dropped—'when one's unhappy—very unhappy—things like that—things like *Heaven*—hurt! Oh! what a *fool* I am!' And she sat straightly up, looking round her.

There was a pause;—then Ashe said in another voice,

'Look here, you know, this won't do. I thought we were to be cousins.'

'Well?' said Kitty, indifferently, not looking at him.

'And I understood that I was to be taken into respectable cousinly counsel?'

'Well?—' said Kitty again, crumbling her bread,—'I can't do it here, can I?'

Ashe laughed.

'Well, anyhow, we're going to sample the garden tomorrow morning? aren't we?'

'I suppose so,' said Kitty. Then after a moment she looked at her right-hand neighbour, the young politician to whom as yet she had scarcely vouchsafed a word.

'What's his name?' she asked under her breath. Ashe repeated it.

'Perhaps I ought to talk to him?'

'Of course you ought,' said Ashe with smiling decision, and turning to the lady whom he had brought in he left her free.

When the ladies rose, Lady Grosville led the way to the large drawing-room, a room which like the library had some character, and a thin elegance of style, not however warmed and harmonised by the delightful presence of books. The walls, blue and white in colour, were panelled in stucco relief. A few family portraits, stiff handlings of stiff people, were placed each in the exact centre of its respective panel. There were a few cases of china, and a few polished tables. A crimson Brussels carpet chosen by Lady Grosville for its 'cheer-

fulness,' covered the floor—and there was a large white sheepskin rug before the fire-place. A few hyacinths in pots, and the bright fire supplied the only gay and living notes—before the ladies arrived.

Still, for an English eye, the room had a certain cold charm, was moreover full of *history*. It hardly deserved at any rate the shiver with which Kitty Bristol looked round it.

But she had little time to dwell upon the room and its meanings, for Lady Grosville approached her with a manner which still showed signs of the catastrophe before dinner.

'Kitty, I think you don't know Miss Lyster yet—Mary Lyster—she wants to be introduced to you.'

Mary advanced smiling; Kitty held out a limp hand, and they exchanged a few words standing in the centre of the floor, while the other guests found seats.

'What a charming contrast!' said Lady Edith Manley in Lady Grosville's ear. She nodded smiling towards the standing pair—struck by the fine straight lines of Mary's satin dress, the roundness of her fine figure, the oval of her head and face, and then by the little vibrating tempestuous creature beside her,—so distinguished, in spite of the billowing flounces and ribbons, so direct and significant, amid all the elaboration.

'Kitty is ridiculously over-dressed,' said Lady Grosville.—'I hope we shall soon change that. My girls are going to take her to their woman.'

Lady Edith put up her eye-glass slowly, and looked at the two Grosville girls; then back at Kitty.

Meanwhile a few perfunctory questions and answers were passing between Miss Lyster and her companion. Mary's aspect as she talked was extremely amiable; one might have called it indulgent, perhaps even by an adjective that implied a yet further shade of delicate supe-

riority. Kitty met it by the same 'grand manner' that Ashe had several times observed in her, a manner caught perhaps from some French model, and caricatured in the taking. Her eyes meanwhile took note of Mary's face and dress, and while she listened, her small teeth tormented her under lip, as though she restrained impatience. All at once, in the midst of some information that Miss Lyster was lucidly giving, Kitty made an impetuous turn. She had caught some words on the further side of the room; and she looked hard, eagerly, at the speaker.

'Who is that?' she inquired.

Mary Lyster, with a sharp sense of interruption, replied that she believed the lady in question was the Grosvilles' French governess. But in the very midst of her sentence, Kitty deserted her, left her standing in the centre of the drawing-room, while the deserter fled across it, and sinking down beside the astonished Mademoiselle took the Frenchwoman's hand by assault and held it in both her own.

'Vous parlez Français?—vous êtes Française? Ah!—ça me fait tant de bien!—Voyons! voyons!—causons un peu!'

And bending forward, she broke into a cataract of French, all the elements of her strange small beauty rushing as it were into flame and movement, at the swift sound and cadence of the words,—like a dancer kindled by music. The occasion was of the slightest; the Frenchwoman might well show a natural bewilderment. But into the slight occasion the girl threw an animation, a passion that glorified it. It was like the leap of a wild rain-stream on the mountains that pours into the first channel which presents itself.

'What beautiful French!' said Lady Edith softly, to Mary Lyster, who had found a seat beside her.

Mary Lyster smiled.

'She has been at school of course in a French convent.' Somehow the tone implied that the explanation disposed of all merit in the performance.

'I am afraid these French convent schools are not at all what they should be,' said Lady Grosville.

And rising to a pyramidal height, her ample moiré dress swelling behind her, her grey head magnificently crowned by its lace cap and black velvet *bandeau*, she swept across the room to where the Dean's wife, Mrs. Winston, sat in fascinated silence observing Lady Kitty. The silence and the attention annoyed her hostess. The first thing to be done with girls of this type, it seemed to Lady Grosville, was to prove to them that they would *not* be allowed to monopolise society.

There are natural monopolies, however; and they are not easy to deal with.

As soon as the gentlemen returned, Mr. Rankine, whom she had treated so badly at dinner, the young agent of the estate, the clergyman of the parish, the Austrian attaché, the Cabinet Minister, and the Dean, all showed a strong inclination to that side of the room which seemed to be held in force by Lady Kitty. The Dean especially was not to be gainsaid. He placed himself in the seat shyly vacated by the French governess, and crossed his thin stockinged legs with the air of one who means to take his ease. There was even a certain curious resemblance between him and Kitty, as was noticed from a distance by Ashe. The Dean, who was very much a man of the world, and came of an historic family, was, in his masculine degree, planned on the same miniature scale, and with the same fine finish as the girl of eighteen. And he carried his knee-breeches, his apron, and his exquisite white head with a natural charm and energy akin to hers,—mellowed though it were by

time, and dignified by office. He began eagerly to talk to her of Paris. His father had been Ambassador for a time under Louis Philippe, and he had boyish memories of the great house in the Faubourg St.-Honoré, and of the Orleanist ministers and men of letters. And lo! Kitty met him at once, in a glow and sparkle that enchanted the old man. Moreover, it appeared that this much beflounced young lady could talk; that she had heard of the famous names and the great affairs to which the Dean made allusion; that she possessed indeed a native and surprising interest in matter of the sort; and a manner, above all, with the old, alternately soft and daring, calculated, as Lady Grosville would no doubt have put it, merely to make fools of them.

In her cousins' house, it seemed, she had talked with old people, survivors of the Orleanist and Bourbon régimes,—even of the Empire; had sat at their feet, a small excited hero-worshipper; and had then rushed blindly into the memoirs and books that concerned them. So—in this French world the child had found time for other things than hunting, and the flattery of her cousin Henri? Ashe was supposed to be devoting himself to the Dean's wife; but both he and she listened most of the time to the sallies and the laughter of the circle where Kitty presided.

'My dear young lady!' cried the delighted Dean,—'I never find anybody who can talk of these things,—it is really astonishing. Ah, *now*, we English know nothing of France,—nor they of us. Why, I was a mere schoolboy then, and I had a passion for their society, and their books—for their *plays*—dare I confess it?'—he lowered his voice, and glanced at his hostess,—'their plays, above all!'

Kitty clapped her hands. The Dean looked at her, and ran on:

'My mother shared it. When I came over for my Eton

holidays, she and I lived at the Théâtre Français. Ah! those were days! *I* remember Mademoiselle Mars in "Hernani."'

Kitty bounded in her seat. Whereupon it appeared that just before she left Paris she had been taken by a friend to see the reigning idol of the Comédie Française, the young and astonishing actress, Sarah Bernhardt, as Doña Sol. And there began straightway an excited duet between her and the Dean; a comparison of old and new, a rivalry of heroines, a hot and critical debate that presently silenced all other conversation in the room, and brought Lord Grosville to stand gaping and astounded behind the Dean, reflecting no doubt that this was not precisely the Dean of the Diocesan Conference.

The old man indeed forgot his age, the girl her youth; they met as equals, on poetic ground, till suddenly Kitty springing up, and to prove her point, began an imitation of 'Sarah' in the great love-scene of the last act, before arresting fate, in the person of Don Ruy breaks in upon the rapture of the lovers. She absolutely forgot the Grosville drawing-room, the staring Grosville girls, the other faces, astonished or severe, neutral or friendly. Out rolled the tide of tragic verse, fine poetry and high passion; and though it be not very much to say, it must at least be said that never had such recitation, in such French, been heard before within the walls of Grosville Park. Nor had the lips of any English girl ever dealt there with a poetic diction so unchastened, and unashamed. Lady Grosville might well feel as though the solid frame of things were melting and cracking round her.

Kitty ceased. She fell back upon her chair, smitten with a sudden perception.

'You made me!' she said reproachfully to the Dean.

The Dean said another 'brava!' and gave another

clap. Then becoming aware of Lord Grosville's open mouth and eye, he sat up, caught his wife's expression, and came back to prose and the present.

'My dear young lady,' he began, 'you have the most extraordinary talent——' when Lady Grosville advanced upon him. Standing before him, she majestically signalled to her husband across his small person.

'William!—Kindly order Mrs. Wilson's carriage.'

Lord Grosville awoke from his stupor with a jerk, and did as he was told. Mrs. Wilson, the agent's timid wife, who was not at all aware that she had asked for her carriage, rose obediently. Then the mistress of the house turned to Lady Kitty.

'You recite very well, Kitty,' she said, with cold and stately emphasis, 'but another time I will ask you to confine yourself to Racine and Corneille. In England we have to be very careful about French writers. There are, however, if I remember right, some fine passages in "Athalie."'

Kitty said nothing. The Austrian attaché who had been following the little incident with the liveliest interest retired to a close inspection of the china. But the Dean, whose temper was of the quick and chivalrous kind, was roused.

'She recites wonderfully! And Victor Hugo is a classic, please, my lady!—just as much as the rest of them. Ah! well,—no doubt, no doubt, there might be things more suitable.—' And the old man came wavering down to earth, as the enthusiasm which Kitty had breathed into him escaped, like the gas from a balloon. 'But do you know, Lady Kitty,'—he struck into a new subject with eagerness, partly to cover the girl, partly to silence Lady Grosville—'you reminded me all the time so remarkably—in your voice—certain inflections—of your sister—your stepsister isn't it?—Lady Alice? You know of course she is close to you to-day—just the other side the park—with the Sowerbys?'

The Dean's wife sprang to her feet in despair. In general it was to her a matter for fond complacency that her husband had no memory for gossip, and was in such matters as innocent and as dangerous as a child. But this was too much! At the same moment Ashe came quickly forward.

'My sister?'—said Kitty—'my sister?'

She spoke low and uncertainly, her eyes fixed upon the Dean.

He looked at her with a sudden odd sense of something unusual, then went on, still floundering—

'We met her at St. Pancras on our way down. If I had only known we were to have had the pleasure of meeting you—Do you know, I think she is looking decidedly better?'

His kindly expression as he rose expected a word of sisterly assent. Meanwhile even Lady Grosville was paralysed, and the words with which she had meant to interpose failed on her lips.

Kitty too rose, looking round for something, which she seemed to find in the face of William Ashe, for her eyes clung there.

'My sister'—she repeated, in the same low, strained voice—'my sister Alice? I—I don't know. I have never seen her.'

. . . . . .

Ashe could not remember afterwards precisely how the incident closed. There was a bustle of departing guests, and from the midst of it Lady Kitty slipped away. But as he came downstairs in smoking trim, ten minutes later, he overheard the injured Dean wrestling with his wife, as she lit a candle for him on the landing.

'My dear!—what did you look at me like that for?—what did the child mean? and what on *earth* is the matter!'

CHAPTER IV

AFTER the ladies had gone to bed, on the night of Lady Kitty's recitation, William Ashe stayed up till past midnight talking with old Lord Grosville. When relieved of the presence of his womenkind, who were apt either to oppress him, in the person of his wife, or to puzzle him, in the persons of his daughters, Lord Grosville was not by any means without value as a talker. He possessed that narrow but still most serviceable fund of human experience, which the English landowner, while our English tradition subsists, can hardly escape, if he will. As guardsman, volunteer, magistrate, lord lieutenant, member—for the sake of his name and his acres—of various important commissions, as military *attaché* even, for a short space, to an important Embassy, he had acquired, by mere living, that for which his intellectual betters had often envied him,—a certain shrewdness, a certain instinct, as to both men and affairs, which were often of more service to him than finer brains to other persons. But like most accomplishments, these also brought their own conceit with them. Lord Grosville, having, in his own opinion, done extremely well without much book education himself, had but little appreciation for it in others.

Nevertheless he rarely missed a chance of conversation with William Ashe, not because the younger man, in spite of his past indolence, was generally held to be both able and accomplished, but because the elder found in him

an invincible taste for men and women, their fortunes, oddities, catastrophes—especially the latter—similar to his own.

Like Mary Lyster, both were good gossips; but of a much more disinterested type than she. Women indeed as gossips are too apt to pursue either the damnation of some one else, or the apotheosis of themselves. But here, the stupider no less than the abler man showed a certain broad detachment not very common in women,—amused by the human comedy itself, making no profit out of it, either for themselves or morals, but asking only that the play should go on.

The incident, or rather the heroine of the evening had given Lord Grosville a topic, which in the case of William Ashe, he saw no reason for avoiding; and in the peace of the smoking room, when he was no longer either hungry for his dinner or worried by his responsibilities as host, he fell upon his wife's family, and, as though he had been the manager of a puppet-show, unpacked the whole box of them for Ashe's entertainment.

Figure after figure emerged; one more besmirched than another. Till finally the most beflecked of all was shaken out and displayed,—Lady Grosville's brother and Kitty's father, the late Lord Blackwater. And on this occasion, Ashe did not try to escape the story which was thus a second time brought across him. Lord Grosville, if he pleased, had a right to tell it, and there was now a curious feeling in Ashe's mind which had been entirely absent before, that he had, in some sort, a right to hear it.

Briefly, the outlines of it fell into something like this shape.—Henry, fifth Earl of Blackwater, had begun life as an Irish peer, with more money than the majority of his class; an initial advantage soon undone by an insane and unscrupulous extravagance. He was, however, a fine, handsome, voracious gentleman, born to prey upon his kind, and when he looked for an heiress he was not long

in finding her. His first wife, a very rich woman, bore him one daughter. Before the daughter was three years old, Lord Blackwater had developed a sturdy hatred of the mother, chiefly because she failed to present him with a son; and he could not even appease himself by the free spending of her money, which, so far as the capital was concerned, was sharply looked after by a pair of trustees, Belfast manufacturers and Presbyterians, to whom the Blackwater type was not at all congenial.

These restrictions presently wore out Lord Blackwater's patience. He left his wife, with a small allowance, to bring up her daughter in one of his Irish houses, while he generously spent the rest of her large income, and his own, and a great deal besides, in London and on the Continent.

Lady Blackwater, however, was not long before she obliged him by dying. Her girl, then twelve years old, lived for a time with one of her mother's trustees. But when she had reached the age of seventeen, her father suddenly commanded her presence in Paris that she might make acquaintance with his second wife.

The new Lady Blackwater was an extremely beautiful woman, Irish, as the first had been, but like her in no other respect. Margaret Fitzgerald was the daughter of a cosmopolitan pair, who after many shifts for a living, had settled in Paris, where the father acted as correspondent for various English papers. Her beauty, her caprices, and her 'affairs' were all well known in Paris. As to what the relations between her and Lord Blackwater might have been before the death of the wife, Lord Grosville took a frankly uncharitable view. But when that event occurred, Blackwater was beginning to get old, and Miss Fitzgerald had become necessary to him. She pressed all her advantages, and it ended in his marrying her. The new Lady Blackwater presented him with one

child, a daughter; and about two years after its birth he sent for his elder daughter, Lady Alice, to join them in the sumptuous apartment in the Place Vendôme which he had furnished for his new wife, in defiance both of his English and Irish creditors.

Lady Alice arrived,—a fair slip of a girl, possessed, it was plain to see, by a nervous terror both of her father and step-mother. But Lady Blackwater received her with effusion, caressed her in public, dressed her to perfection, and made all possible use of the girl's presence in the house for the advancement of her own social position. Within a year the Belfast trustees, watching uneasily from a distance, received a letter from Lord Blackwater, announcing Lady Alice's runaway marriage with a certain Colonel Wensleydale, formerly of the Grenadier Guards. Lord Blackwater professed himself vastly annoyed and displeased. The young people, furiously in love, had managed the affair, however, with a skill that baffled all vigilance. Married they were, and without any settlements, Colonel Wensleydale having nothing to settle, and Lady Alice, like a little fool, being only anxious to pour all that she possessed into the lap of her beloved. The father threw himself on the mercy of the trustees, reminding them that in little more than three years Lady Alice would become unfettered mistress of her own fortune, and begging them meanwhile to make proper provision for the rash but happy pair. Harry Wensleydale after all was a rattling good fellow, with whom all the young women were in love. The thing, though naughty, was natural; and the Colonel would make an excellent husband.

One Presbyterian trustee left his business in Belfast, and ventured himself among the abominations of Paris. He was much be-fooled and be-feasted. He found a shy young wife tremulously in love; a handsome husband; an amiable step-mother. He knew no one in Paris who

could enlighten him, and was not clever enough to invent means of getting information for himself. He was induced to promise a sufficient income for the moment on behalf of himself and his co-trustee; and, for the rest, was obliged to be content with vague assurances from Colonel Wensleydale that, as soon as his wife came into her property, fitting settlements should be made.

Four years passed by. The young people lived with the Blackwaters, and their income kept the establishment going. Lady Alice had a child, and was at first not altogether unhappy. She was little more than a timid child herself; and no doubt, to begin with, she was in love. Then came her majority. In defiance of all her trustees, she gave her whole fortune to her husband, and no power could prevent her from so doing.

The Blackwater ménage blazed up into a sudden splendour. Lady Blackwater's carriage, and Lady Blackwater's jewels had never been finer; and amid the crowds who frequented the house, the slight figure, the sallow face and absent eyes of her step-daughter attracted little remark. Lady Alice Wensleydale was said to be delicate, and reserved; she made no friends, explained herself to no one; and it was supposed that she occupied herself with her little boy.

Then one December she disappeared from the apartment in the Place Vendôme. It was said that she and the boy found the climate of Paris too cold in winter, and had gone for a time to Italy. Colonel Wensleydale continued to live with the Blackwaters, and their apartment was no less sumptuous, their dinners no less talked of, their extravagance no less noisy than before. But Lady Alice did not come back with the spring; and some ugly rumours began to creep about. They were checked, however, by the death of Lord Blackwater, which occurred within a year of his daughter's departure; by the mon-

strous debts he left behind him; and by the sale of the contents of the famous apartment—matters, all of them, sufficiently ugly or scandalous in themselves to keep the tongues of fame busy. Lady Blackwater left Paris, and when she reappeared, it was in Rome as the Comtesse d'Estrées, the wife of yet another old man, whose health obliged them to winter in the south, and to spend the summer in yachting. Her *salon* in Rome under Pio Nono became a great rendezvous for English and Americans, attracted by the historic names and titles that M. d'Estrées' connections among the Black nobility, his wealth, and his interest in several of the Catholic banking-houses of Rome and Naples enabled his wife to command.

Colonel Wensleydale did not appear. Madame d'Estrées let it be understood that her step-daughter was of a difficult temper, and now spent most of her time in Ireland. Her own daughter, her 'darling Kitty,' was being educated in Paris by the Sœurs Blanches, and she pined for the day when the 'little sweet' should join her, ready to spread her wings in the great world. But mothers must not be impatient, Kitty must have all the advantages that befitted her rank; and to what better hands could the most anxious mother entrust her than to those charming, aristocratic, accomplished nuns of the Sœurs Blanches?

Then one January day, M. d'Estrées drove out to San Paolo fuori le Mura, and caught a blast from the snowy Sabines coming back. In three days he was dead, and his well-provided widow had snatched the bulk of his fortune from the hands of his needy and embittered kindred.

Within six months of his death, she had bought a house in St. James's Place, and her London career had begun.

'It is here that we come in,' said Lord Grosville, when

with more digressions, and more plainness of speech with regard to his quondam sister-in-law than can be here reproduced, he had brought his story to this point. 'Blackwater—the old ruffian—when he was dying had a moment of remorse. He wrote to my wife and asked her to look after his girls, "For God's sake, Lina, see if you can help Alice,—Wensleydale's a perfect brute." That was the first light we had on the situation, for Adelina had long before washed her hands of him; and we knew that *she* hated us. Well, we tried; of course we tried. But so long as her husband lived, Alice would have nothing to say to any of us. I suppose she thought that for her boy's sake, she'd better keep a bad business to herself as much as possible——'

'Wensleydale—Wensleydale?'—said Ashe, who had been smoking hard and silently beside his host,—'you mean the man who distinguished himself in the Crimea? He died last year—at Naples, wasn't it?'

Lord Grosville assented.

It appeared that during the last year of his life Lady Alice had nursed her husband faithfully through disease and poverty; for scarcely a vestige of her fortune remained, and an application for money made by Wensleydale to Madame d'Estrées, unknown to his wife, had been peremptorily refused. The Colonel died, and within three months of his death Lady Alice had also lost her son and only child, of blood poisoning developed in Naples, whither he had been summoned from school that his father might see him for the last time.

Then, after seventeen years, Lady Alice came back to her kindred, who had last seen her as a young girl,—gentle, undeveloped, easily led, and rather stupid. She returned a grey-haired woman of thirty-four, who had lost youth, fortune, child and husband; whose aspect moreover suggested losses still deeper and more drear. At

first she wrapped herself in what seemed to some a dull, and to others a tragic silence. But suddenly a flame leapt up in her. She became aware of the position of Madame d'Estrées in London; and one day, at a private view of the Academy, her former step-mother went up to her smiling, with outstretched hand. Lady Alice turned very pale; the hand dropped, and Alice Wensleydale walked rapidly away. But that night, in the Grosville house, she spoke out.

'She told Lina and myself the whole story. You'd have thought the woman was possessed. My wife—she's not of the crying sort, nor am I. But she cried,—and I believe—well, I can tell you it was enough to move a stone.—And when she'd done, she just went away, and locked her door, and let no one say a word to her. She has told one or two other relations and friends, and——'

'And the relations and friends have told others?'

'Well, I can answer for myself,' said Grosville after a pause. 'This happened three months ago. I never have told, and never shall tell all the details as she told them to us. But we have let enough be known——'

'Enough?—enough to damn Madame d'Estrées?'

'Oh, well, as far as the women were concerned, she was mostly that already. There are other tales going about. I expect you know them.'

'No, I don't know them,' said Ashe.

Lord Grosville's face expressed surprise.—'Well, this finished it,'—he said.

'Poor child!'—said Ashe slowly, putting down his cigarette, and turning a thoughtful look on the carpet.

'Alice?' said Lord Grosville.

'No.'

'Oh! you mean Kitty? Yes,—I had forgotten her for the moment. Yes,—poor child.'

There was silence a moment; then Lord Grosville inquired—

'What do you think of her?'

'I?' said Ashe, with a laugh. 'I don't know. She's obviously very pretty——'

'And a handful!' said Lord Grosville.

'Oh! quite plainly a handful,' said Ashe, rather absently. Then the memory of Kitty's entry recurred to them both, and they laughed.

'Not much shyness left in that young woman—eh?' said the old man. 'She tells my girls such stories of her French doings,—my wife's had to stop it. She seems to have had all sorts of love-affairs already. And of course she'll have any number over here—sure to. Some unscrupulous fellow 'll get hold of her,—for naturally the right sort won't marry her. I don't know what we can do. Adelina offered to take her altogether. But that woman wouldn't hear of it. She wrote Lina rather a good letter—on her dignity—and that kind of thing. We gave her an opening, and by Jove, she took it.'

'And meanwhile Lady Kitty has no dealings with her step-sister?'

'You heard what she said. Extraordinary girl!—to let the thing out plump like that. Just like the blood. They say anything that comes into their heads. If we had known that Alice was to be with the Sowerbys this week-end, my wife would certainly have put Kitty off. It would be uncommonly awkward if they were to meet—here for instance. Hullo!—is it getting late?'

For the whist-players at the end of the library had pushed back their chairs, and men were strolling back from the billiard-room.

'I am afraid Lady Kitty understands there is something wrong with her mother's position,' said Ashe, as they rose.

'I daresay. Brought up in Paris, you see,' said the

white-haired Englishman, with a shrug. 'Of course she knows everything she shouldn't.'

'Brought up in a convent, please,' said Ashe smiling. 'And I thought the French *girl* was the most innocent and ignorant thing alive.'

Lord Grosville received the remark with derision.

'You ask my wife what she thinks about French convents. She knows—she's had lots of Catholic relations. She'll tell you tales!'

Ashe thought, however, that he could trust himself to see that she did nothing of the sort.

The smoking-room broke up late, but the new Under-Secretary sat up still later, reading and smoking in his bedroom. A box of Foreign Office papers lay on his table. He went through them with a keen sense of pleasure, enjoying his new work and his own competence to do it,—of which, notwithstanding his remarks to Mary Lyster, he was not really at all in doubt. Then when his comments were done, and the papers replaced in the order in which they would now go up to the Secretary of State, he felt the spring night oppressively mild, and walking to the window, he threw it wide open.

He looked out upon a Dutch garden, full of spring flowers in bloom. In the midst was a small fountain, which murmured to itself through the night. An orangery or conservatory, of a charming eighteenth century design, ran round the garden in a semi-circle, its flat pilasters and mouldings of yellow stone taking under the moonlight the colour and the delicacy of ivory. Beyond the terrace which bordered the garden, the ground fell to a river, of which the reaches, now dazzling, now sombre, now slipping secret under woods, and now silverly open to the gentle slopes of the park, brought wildness and romance into a scene that had else been

tame. Beyond the river on a rising ground was a village church with a spire. The formal garden, the Georgian conservatory, the park, the river, the church—they breathed England, and the traditional English life. All that they implied, of custom and inheritance, of strength and narrowness, of cramping prejudice, and stubborn force, was very familiar to Ashe, and on the whole very congenial. He was glad to be an Englishman, and a member of an English Government. The ironic mood, which was tolerably constant in him, did not in the least interfere with his normal enjoyment of normal goods. He saw himself often as a shade among shadows, as an actor among actors; but the play was good all the same. That a man should know himself to be a fool was in his eyes as it was in Lord Melbourne's, the first of necessities. But fool or no fool, let him find the occupations that suited him, and pursue them. On those terms life was still amply worth living, and ginger was still hot in the mouth.

This was his usual philosophy. Religiously he was a sceptic, enormously interested in religion. Should he ever become Prime Minister, as Lady Tranmore prophesied, he would know much more theology than the bishops he might be called on to appoint. Politically, at the same time, he was an aristocrat, enormously interested in liberty. The absurdities of his own class were still more plain to him perhaps than the absurdities of the populace. But had he lived a couple of generations earlier he would have gone with passion for Catholic Emancipation, and boggled at the Reform Bill. And if Fate had thrown him on earlier days still, he would not like Falkland have died ingeminating peace; he would have fought; but on which side, no friend of his—up till now—could have been quite sure. To have the reputation of an idler, and to be in truth a plodding and unwearied student; this, at any

rate, pleased him. To avow an enthusiasm, or an affection, generally seemed to him an indelicacy; only two or three people in the world knew what was the real quality of his heart. Yet no man feigns shirking without in some measure learning to shirk; and there were certain true indolences and Sybaritisms in Ashe of which he was fully and contemptuously aware,—without either wishing or feeling himself able to break the yoke of them.

At the present moment, however, he was rather conscious of much unusual stirring and exaltation of personality. As he stood looking out into the English night the currents of his blood ran free and fast. Never had he felt the natural appetite for living so strong in him, combined with what seemed to be at once a divination of coming change, and a thirst for it. Was it the mere advancement of his fortunes?—or something infinitely subtler and sweeter? It was as though waves of softness and of yearning welled up from some unknown source, seeking an object and an outlet.

As he stood there dreaming, he suddenly became conscious of sounds in the room overhead. Or rather in the now absolute stillness of the rest of the house he realised that the movements and voices above him which had really been going on since he entered his room, persisted, when everything else had died away.

Two people were talking; or rather one voice ran on perpetually, broken at intervals by the other. He began to suspect to whom the voice belonged; and as he did so, the window above his own was thrown open. He stepped back involuntarily, but not before he had caught a few words in French spoken apparently by Lady Kitty.

'Ciel! what a night!—and how the flowers smell! And the stars—I adore the stars! Mademoiselle!—come here!—Mademoiselle! answer me—I won't tell tales—now do you—*really and truly*—believe in God?'

A laugh, which was a laugh of pleasure, ran through Ashe, as he hurriedly put out his lights.

'Tormentor!' he said to himself—'must you put a woman through her theological paces at this time of night? Can't you go to sleep, you little whirlwind?—What's to be done? If I shut my window the noise will scare her. But I can't stand eaves-dropping here.'

He withdrew softly from the window and began to undress. But Lady Kitty was leaning out, and her voice carried amazingly. Heard in this way also, apart from form and face, it became a separate living thing. Ashe stood arrested, his watch that he was winding up in his hand. He had known the voice till now as something sharp and light, the sign surely of a chatterer and a flirt. To-night, as Kitty made use of it to expound her own peculiar theology to the French governess—whereof a few fragments now and then floated down to Ashe—nothing could have been more musical, melancholy, caressing. A voice full of sex, and the spell of sex.

What had she been talking of all these hours to Mademoiselle?—a lady whom she could never have set eyes on before this visit. He thought of her face, in the drawing-room, as she had spoken of her sister,—of her eyes, so full of a bright feverish pain, which had hung upon his own.

Had she indeed been confiding all her home secrets to this stranger? Ashe felt a movement of distaste, almost of disgust. Yet he remembered that it was by her unconventionality, her lack of all proper reticence, or, as many would have said, all delicate feeling, that she had made her first impression upon him. Aye, that had been an impression—an impression indeed! He realised the fact profoundly, as he stood lingering in the darkness, trying not to hear the voice that thrilled him.

At last!—was she going to bed?

'Ah!—but I am a pig!—to keep you up like this. Allez dormir!' (—The sound of a kiss—) 'I? Oh, no!—why should one go to bed? It is in the night one begins to live——'

She fell to humming a little French tune,—then broke off—

'You remember?—you promise? You have the letter?'

Asseverations apparently from Mademoiselle, and a mention of eight o'clock,—followed by remorse from Kitty.

'Eight o'clock! And I keep you like this. I am a brute beast!—Allez—allez vite!' And quick steps scudded across the floor above, followed by the shutting of a door.

Kitty, however, came back to the window, and Ashe could still hear her sighing and talking to herself.

What had she been plotting? A letter? Conveyed by Mademoiselle?—to whom?

Long after all sounds above had ceased Ashe still lay awake, thinking of the story he had heard from Lord Grosville. Certainly if he had known it, he would never have gone familiarly to Madame d'Estrées' house. Laxity, for a man of his type, is one thing; lying meanness and cruelty are another. What could be done for this poor child in her strange and sinister position? He was ironically conscious of a sudden heat of missionary zeal. For if the creature to be saved had not possessed such a pair of eyes—so slim a neck—such a haunting and teasing personality—what then?

The question presently plunged with him into sleep. But he had not forgotten it when he awoke.

He had just finished dressing next morning, when he chanced to see from the front window of his room which

commanded the main stretch of the park, the figure of a lady on one of the paths. She seemed to be returning from the further end of a long avenue and was evidently hurrying to reach the house. As she approached, however, she turned aside into a shrubbery walk and was soon lost to view. But Ashe had recognised Mademoiselle D. The matter of the letter recurred to him. He guessed that she had already delivered it. But where?

At breakfast Lady Kitty did not appear. Ashe made inquiries of the younger Miss Grosville, who replied with some tartness that she supposed Kitty had a cold, and hurried off herself to dress for Sunday school. It was not at all the custom for young ladies to breakfast in bed on Sundays at Grosville Park, and Lady Grosville's brow was clouded. Ashe felt it a positive effort to tell her that he was not going to church, and when she had marshalled her flock and carried them off, those left behind knew themselves indeed as heathens and publicans.

Ashe wandered out with some official papers and a pipe into the spring sunshine. Mr. Kershaw, the editor, would gladly have caught him for a political talk. But Ashe would not be caught. As to the interests of England in the Persian Gulf, both they and Mr. Kershaw might for the moment go hang. Would Lady Kitty meet him in the old garden at 11.30, or would she not? That was the only thing that mattered.

However, it was still more than an hour to the time mentioned. Ashe spent a while in roaming a wood delicately pied with primroses and anemones, and then sauntered back into the gardens, which were old and famous.

Suddenly, as he came upon a terrace bordered by a thick yew hedge, and descending by steps to a lower terrace, he became aware of voices in a strange tone and key,—not loud, but, as it were, intensified far beyond the

note of ordinary talk. Ashe stood still; for he had recognised the voice of Lady Kitty. But before he had made up his mind what to do, a lady began to ascend the steps which connected the upper terrace with the lower. She came straight towards him and Ashe looked at her with astonishment. She was not a member of the Grosville house party, and Ashe had never seen her before. Yet in her pale unhappy face there was something that recalled another person; something too in her gait, and her passionate energy of movement. She swept past him, and he saw that she was tall and thin, and dressed in deep mourning. Her eyes were set on some inner vision; he felt that she scarcely saw him. She passed like an embodied grief—menacing and lamentable.

Something like a cry pursued her up the steps. But she did not turn. She walked swiftly on, and was soon lost to sight in the trees.

Ashe hesitated a moment, then hurried down the steps.

On a stone seat beneath the yew hedge, Kitty Bristol lay prone. He heard her sobs, and they went most strangely through his heart.

'Lady Kitty!'—he said, as he stood beside her, and bent over her.

She looked up, and showed no surprise. Her face was bathed in tears, but her hand sought his piteously and drew him towards her.

'I have seen my sister,' she said—'and she hates me. What have I done? I think I shall die of despair!'

CHAPTER V

THE effect of the few sobbing words, with which Kitty Bristol had greeted his presence beside her, upon the feeling of William Ashe was both sharp and deep, for they seemed already to imply a peculiar relation, a special link between them. Had it not indeed begun in that very moment at St. James's Place when he had first caught sight of her, sitting forlorn in her white dress?—when she had 'willed' him to come to her, and he came? Surely—though as to this he had his qualms—she could not have spoken with this abandonment to any other of her new English acquaintances? to Darrell, for instance, who was expected at Grosville Park that evening? No! From the beginning she had turned to him, William Ashe; she had been conscious of the same mutual understanding, the same sympathy in difference that he himself felt!

It was, at any rate, with the feeling of one whose fate has most strangely, most unexpectedly overtaken him that he sat down beside her. His own pulses were running at a great rate; but there was to be no sign of it for her. He tried indeed to calm her by that mere cheerful strength and vitality of which he was so easily master. 'Why should you be in despair?' he said, bending towards her. 'Tell me. Let me try and help you. Was your sister unkind to you?'

Kitty made no reply at once. The tears that brimmed her large eyes slipped down her cheeks without disfiguring

her. She was looking absently, intently, into a dark depth of wood as though she sought there for some truth that escaped her,—truth of the past or of the present.

'I don't know,' she said, at last, shaking her head, 'I don't know whether it was unkind. Perhaps it was only what we deserve, Maman and I.'

'You!' cried Ashe.

'Yes,' she said, passionately. "Who's going to separate between Maman and me? If she's done mean, shocking things, the people she's done them to will hate me too. They *shall* hate me! It's right.'

She turned to him violently. She was very white, and her little hands as she sat there before him, proudly erect, twisted a lace handkerchief between them, that would soon be in tatters. Somehow Ashe winced before the wreck of the handkerchief; what need to ruin the pretty fragile thing?

'I am quite sure no one will ever hate you for what you haven't done,' he said steadily. 'That would be abominably unfair. But, you see, I don't understand—and I don't like—I don't wish—to ask questions.'

'*Do* ask questions!' she cried, looking at him almost reproachfully. 'That's just what I want you to do—Only'—she added, hanging her head in depression—'I shouldn't know what to answer. I am played with, and treated as a baby! There is something horrible the matter—and no one trusts me—everyone keeps me in the dark. No one ever thinks whether I am miserable or not!'

She raised her hands to her eyes and vehemently wiped away her tears with the tattered lace handkerchief. In all these words and actions, however, she was graceful and touching, because she was natural. She was not posing or conscious, she was hiding nothing. Yet Ashe felt certain she could act a part magnificently; only it

would not be for the lie's sake, but for the sake of some romantic impulse or imagination.

'Why should you torment yourself so?' he asked her kindly. Her hand had dropped and lay beside her on the bench. To his own amazement he found himself clasping it. 'Isn't it better to forget old griefs? You can't help what happened years ago—you can't undo it. You've got to live your own life—*happily!* And I just wish you'd set about it!'

He smiled at her, and there were few faces more attractive than his when he let his natural softness have its way, without irony. She let her eyes be drawn to his, and as they met he saw a flush rise in her clear skin and spread to the pale gold of her hair. The man in him was marvellously pleased by that flush—fascinated, indeed. But she gave him small time to observe it, she drew herself impatiently away.

'Of course, you don't understand a word about it,' she said, 'or you couldn't talk like that. But—I'll tell you!' Her eyes, half miserable, half audacious, returned to him. 'My sister—came here—because I sent for her. I made Mademoiselle go with a letter. Of course, I knew there was a mystery—I knew the Grosvilles did not want us to meet—I knew that she and Maman hated each other. But Maman will tell me nothing—and I have a *right* to know.'

'No—you have no right to know,' said Ashe, gravely.

She looked at him wildly.

'I have—I have!' she repeated passionately. 'Well—I told my sister to meet me here—I had forgotten, you see, all about you! My mind was so full of Alice. And when she came I felt as if it was a dream—a horrible tragic dream. You know!—she is *so* like me,—which means, I suppose, that we are both like papa. Only her face—it's not handsome, oh, no!—but it's stern—and—

yes, noble! I was proud of her. I would like to have gone on my knee and kissed her dress. But she would not take my hand—she would hardly speak to me. She said she had come, because it was best, now that I was in England, that we should meet once,—and understand that we *couldn't* meet,—that we could never, never be friends. She said that she hated my mother—that for years she had kept silence,—but that now she meant to punish Maman—to drive her from London. And then—' the girl's lips trembled under the memory,—'she came close to me, and she looked into my eyes—and she said—"Yes—we're like each other—we're like our father—and it would be better for us both if we had never been born——"'

'Ah! cruel!' cried Ashe, involuntarily, and once more his hand found Kitty's small fingers and pressed them in his.

Kitty looked at him with a strange exalted look.

'No. I think it's true. I often think I'm not made to be happy. I can't ever be happy—it 's not in me.'

'It 's in you to say foolish things then!' said Ashe, lightly, and crossing his arms he tried to assume the practical elder-brotherly air, which he felt befitted the situation—if anything befitted it. For in truth it seemed to him one singularly confused and ugly. Their talk floated above tragic depths, guessed at by him, wholly unknown to her. And yet her youth shrank from it knew not what—'as an animal shrinks from shadows in the twilight.' She seemed to him to sit enwrapped in a vague cloud of shame, resenting and hating it, yet not able to escape from thinking and talking of it. But she must not talk of it.

She did not answer his last remark for a little while. She sat looking before her, overwhelmed, it seemed, by an inward rush of images and sensations. Till, with a

sudden movement, she turned to him and said, smiling, quite in her ordinary voice—

'Do you know why I shall never be happy? It is because I have such a bad temper.'

'Have you?' said Ashe, smiling

She gave him a curious look.

'You don't believe it? If you had been in the convent, you would have believed it. I'm mad sometimes—quite mad; with pride, I suppose, and vanity. The Sœurs said it was that.'

'They had to explain it somehow,' said Ashe. 'But I am quite sure that if I lived in a convent, I should have a furious temper.'

'You!——' she said, half contemptuously. 'You couldn't be ill-tempered anywhere. That's the one thing I don't like about you – you're too calm—too—too satisfied. It's—Well! you said a sharp thing to me, so I don't see why I shouldn't say one to you. You shouldn't look as though you enjoyed your life so much. It's *bourgeois*! It is indeed.' And she frowned upon him with a little extravagant air that amused him.

By some prescience, she had put on that morning a black dress of thin material, made with extreme simplicity. No flounces, no fanfaronnade. A little girlish dress, that made the girlish figure seem even frailer and lighter than he remembered it the night before, in the splendours of her Paris gown. Her large black hat emphasised the whiteness of her brow, the brilliance of her most beautiful eyes; and then all the rest was insubstantial sprite and airy nothing, to be crushed in one hand. And yet what untamed, indomitable things breathed from it!—a self surely more self, more intensely, obstinately alive than any he had yet known.

Her attack had brought the involuntary blood to his cheeks, which annoyed him. But he invited her to say

why cheerfulness was a vice. She replied that no one should look success—as much as he did.

'And you scorn success?'

'Scorn it' She drew a long breath, clasped both her hands above her head, then slowly let the thin arms fall again. 'Scorn it! What nonsense! But everybody who hasn't got it hates those who have.'

'Don't hate me!' said Ashe, quickly.

'Yes,' she said, with stubbornness. 'I must. Do you know why I was such a wild-cat at school? Because some of the other girls were more important than I—much more important—and richer—and more beautiful—and people paid them more attention. And that seemed to *burn* the heart in me;'—she pressed her hands to her breast with a passionate gesture. 'You know the French word *panache*? Well, that's what I care for—that's what I *adore*! To be the first—the best—the most distinguished. To be envied—and pointed at—obeyed when I lift my finger—and then to come to some great, glorious, tragic end!——'

Ashe moved impatiently.

'Lady Kitty—I don't like to hear you talk like this. It's wild, and it's also—I beg your pardon——'

'In bad taste?' she said, catching him up, breathlessly. 'That's what you meant—isn't it? You said it to me before—when I called you handsome.'

'Pshaw!' he said, in vexation. She watched him throw himself back and feel for his cigarette-case; a gesture of her hand gave him leave; she waited, smiling, till he had taken a few calming whiffs. Then she gently moved towards him.

'Don't be angry with me!' she said, in a sweet, low voice. 'Don't you understand how hard it is—to have that nature—and then to come here out of the convent—where one had lived on dreams—and find oneself——'

She turned her head away. Ashe put down his new-lit cigarette.

'Find yourself?' he repeated.

'Everybody scorns me!' she said, her brow drooping.

Ashe exclaimed.

'You know it's true. My mother is not received. Can you deny that?'

'She has many friends,' said Ashe.

'She is *not received*. When I speak of her no one answers me. Lady Grosville asks me here—*me*—out of charity. It would be thought a disgrace to marry me—'

'Look here, Lady Kitty!——'

'And I—' she wrung her small hands, as though she clasped the necks of her enemies—'I would never *look* at a man who did not think it the glory of his life to win me! So you see I shall never marry. But then the dreadful thing is——'

She let him see a white stormy face.

'That I have no loyalty to Maman—I—I don't think I even love her.'

Ashe surveyed her gravely.

'You don't mean that,' he said.

'I think I do,' she persisted. 'I had a horrid childhood. I won't tell tales; but, you see, I don't *know* Maman. I know the Sœurs much better. And then for someone you don't know—to have to—to have to bear—this horrible thing——'

She buried her face in her hands. Ashe looked at her in perplexity.

'You shan't bear anything horrible,' he said, with energy. 'There are plenty of people who will take care of that. Do you mind telling me?—have there been special difficulties just lately?'

'Oh, yes,' she said, calmly, looking up, 'awful! Maman's debts are—well—ridiculous. For that alone I

don't think she 'll be able to stay in London—apart from—Alice.'

The name recalled all she had just passed through, and her face quivered. 'What will she do?' she said, under her breath. 'How will she punish us?—and why?—for what?'

Her dread—her ignorance—her fierce bruised vanity—her struggling pride—her helplessness, appealed amazingly to the man beside her. He began to talk to her very gently and wisely, begging her to let the past alone, to think only what could be done to help the present. In the first place, would she not let his mother be of use to her?

He could answer for Lady Tranmore. Why shouldn't Lady Kitty spend the summer with her in Scotland? No doubt Madame d'Estrées would be abroad—

'Then I must go with her,' said Kitty.

Ashe hesitated.

'Of course, if she wishes it.'

'But I don't know that she will wish it. She is not very fond of me,' said Kitty, doubtfully. 'Yes, I would like to stay with Lady Tranmore. But will your cousin be there?'

'Miss Lyster?'

Kitty nodded.

'How can I tell? Of course, she is often there.'

'It is quite curious,' said Kitty, after reflection, 'how we dislike each other. And it is so odd. You know most people like me?'

She looked up at him, without a trace of coquetry, rather with a certain timidity that feared possible rebuff. 'That's always been my difficulty,' she went on, 'till now. Everybody spoils me. I always get my own way. In the convent I was indulged and flattered, and then they wondered that I made all sorts of follies! I want a

guide—that's quite certain; somebody to tell me what to do.'

'I would offer myself for the post,' said Ashe, 'but that I feel perfectly sure that you would never follow anybody's advice in anything.'

'Yes, I would,' she said, wistfully, 'I would——'

Ashe's face changed.

'Ah, if you would——'

She sprang up. 'Do you see——' she pointed to some figures on a distant path. 'They are coming back from church. You understand?—*nobody* must know about my sister. It will come round to Aunt Lena, of course; but I hope it'll be when I'm gone. If she knew now, I should go back to London to-day!'

Ashe made it clear to her that he would be discretion itself. They left the bench, but, as they began to ascend the steps, Kitty turned back.

'I wish I hadn't seen her!' she said, in a miserable tone, the tears flooding once more into her eyes.

Ashe looked at her with great kindness, but without speaking. The moment of sharp pain passed, and she moved on languidly beside him. But there was an infection in his strong handsome presence, and her smiles soon came back. By the time they neared the house, indeed, she seemed to be in wild spirits again.

Did he know, she asked him, that three more guests were coming that afternoon—Mr. Darrell, Mr. Louis Harman, *and*—Mr. Geoffrey Cliffe? She laid an emphasis on the last name, which made Ashe say, carelessly—

'You want to meet him so much?'

'Of course. Doesn't all the world?'

Ashe replied that he could only answer for himself, and as far as he was concerned he could do very well without Cliffe's company at all times.

Whereupon Kitty protested with fire that other

men were jealous of such a famous person, because women liked him—because——

'Because the man's a coxcomb, and the women spoil him?'

'A coxcomb!'

Kitty was up in arms.

'Pray, is he not a great traveller?—a *very* great traveller?' she asked with indignation.

''Certainly—by his own account.'

'And a most brilliant writer?'

'Macaulayese,'—said Ashe perversely—'and not very good at that.'

Kitty was at first struck dumb, and then began a voluble protest against unfairness so monstrous. Did not all intelligent people read and admire? It was mere jealousy, she repeated, to deny the gentleman's claims.

Ashe let her talk and quote and excite herself, applying every now and then a little sly touch of the goad, to make her still run on, and so forget the tragic hour which had overshadowed her. And meanwhile all he cared for was to watch the flashing of her face and eyes, and the play of the wind in her hair, and the springing grace with which she moved. Poor child!—it all came back to that—poor child!—what was to be done with her?

At luncheon—the Sunday luncheon—which still, at Grosville Park, as in the Early Victorian days of Lord Grosville's mother, consisted of a huge baronial sirloin to which all else upon the varied table appeared as appurtenance and appendage, Ashe allowed himself the inward reflection that the Grosville Park Sundays were degenerating. Both Lord and Lady Grosville had been good hosts in their day; and the downrightness of the wife had been as much to the taste of many as the agree-

able gossip of the husband. But on this occasion both were silent and absent-minded. Lady Grosville showed no generalship in placing her guests; the wrong people sat next to each other, and the whole party dragged—without a leader.

And certainly Kitty Bristol did nothing to enliven it. She sat very silent, her black dress changing her a good deal, to Ashe's thinking, bringing back, as he chose to fancy, the pale convent girl. Was it so that she went through her pious exercises?—by the way, she was, of course, a Catholic?—said her lessons, and went to her confessor? Had the French cousin with whom she rode stag-hunting ever seen her like this? No; Ashe felt certain that 'Henri' had never seen her, except as a fashion-plate, or *en amazone*. He could have made nothing of this ghost in black—this distinguished, piteous, little ghost.

After luncheon it became tolerably clear to Ashe that Lady Grosville's preoccupation had a cause. And presently catching him alone in the library, whither he had retired with some official papers, she closed the door with deliberate care, and stood before him.

'I see you are interested in Kitty, and I feel as if I must tell you,—and ask your opinion. William—do you know what that child has been doing?'

He looked up from his writing.

'Ah!—what have you been discovering?'

'Grosville told you the story last night.'

Ashe nodded.

'Well—Kitty wrote to Alice this morning—and they met. Alice has kept her room since—prostrate—so the Sowerbys tell me. I have just had a note from Mrs. Sowerby. Wasn't it an extraordinary, an indelicate thing to do?'

Ashe studied the frowning lady a moment—so large

and daunting in her black silk and white lace. She seemed to suggest all those aspects of the English Sunday for which he had most secret dislike,—its Pharisaism and dulness and heavy meals. He felt himself through and through Lady Kitty's champion.

'I should have thought it very natural,' was his reply.

Lady Grosville threw up her hands.

Natural!—when she knows—'

'How can she know?' cried Ashe hotly. 'How can such a child know or guess anything? She only knows that there is some black charge against her mother, on which no one will enlighten her. How can they? But meanwhile her mother is ostracised, and she feels herself dragged into the disgrace, not understanding why or wherefore. Could anything be more pathetic—more touching?'

In his heat of feeling, he got up, and began to pace up and down. Lady Grosville's countenance expressed first astonishment—then wavering.

'Oh—of course, it's very sad,' she said—'extremely sad. But I should have thought Kitty was clever enough to understand at least that Alice must have some grave reason for breaking with her mother——'

'Don't you all forget what a child she is,' said Ashe indignantly—'not yet nineteen!'

'Yes, that's true,' said Lady Grosville grudgingly. 'I must confess I find it difficult to judge her fairly. She's so different from my own girls.'

Ashe hastily agreed. Then it struck him as odd that he should have fallen so quickly into this position of Kitty's defender with her father's family; and he drew in his horns. He resumed his work, and Lady Grosville sat for a while, her hands in her lap, quietly observing him.

At last she said—

'So you think, William, I had better leave Kitty alone?'

'About what?' Ashe raised his curly head with a laugh. 'Don't put too much responsibility on me. I know nothing about young ladies.'

'I don't know that I do—much,' said Lady Grosville candidly. 'My own daughters are so exceptional.'

Ashe held his peace. Distant cousins as they were, he hardly knew the Grosville girls apart, and had never yet grasped any reason why he should.

'At any rate, I see clearly,' said Lady Grosville after another pause, 'that you're very sorry for Kitty. Of course it's very nice of you, and I find it's what most people feel.'

'Hang it! dear Lady Grosville, why shouldn't they?' said Ashe, turning round on his chair. 'If ever there was a forlorn little person on earth, I thought Lady Kitty was that person at lunch to-day.'

'And after that absurd exhibition last night!' said Lady Grosville, with a shrug. 'You never know where to have her. You think she looked ill?'

'I am sure she has got a splitting headache,' said Ashe boldly. 'And why you and Grosville shouldn't be as sorry for her as for Lady Alice I can't imagine. *She's* done nothing.'

'No, that's true,' said Lady Grosville, as she rose. Then she added, 'I'll go and see if she has a headache. You must consult with us, William; you know the mother so well.'

'Oh, I'm no good!' said Ashe, with energy. 'But I'm sure that kindness would pay with Lady Kitty?'

He smiled at her, wishing to heaven she would go.

Lady Grosville stared.

'I hope we are always kind to her,' she said, with a touch of haughtiness. And then the library door closed behind her.

'Kindness' was indeed that afternoon the order of the day, as from the Grosvilles to Lady Kitty. Ashe wondered how she liked it. The girls followed her about with shawls. Lady Grosville installed her on a sofa in the back drawing-room. A bottle of sal-volatile appeared, and Caroline Grosville, instead of going twice to Sunday-school, devoted herself to fanning Kitty, though the weather—which was sunny, with a sharp east wind—suggested, to Ashe's thinking, fires rather than fans.

He was himself carried off for the customary Sunday walk, Mr. Kershaw being now determined to claim the sacred rights of the Press. The walkers left the house by a garden door, to reach which they had to pass through the further drawing-room. Kitty, a picturesque figure on the sofa, nodded farewell to Ashe, and then, unseen by Caroline Grosville, who sat behind her, shot him a last look which drove him to a precipitate exit lest the inward laugh should out.

The walk through the flat Cambridgeshire country was long and strenuous. Though for at least half of it the active journalist who was Ashe's companion conceived the poorest opinion of the new Minister. Ashe knew nothing; had no opinions; cared for nothing, except now and then for the stalking of an unfamiliar bird, or the antics of the dogs, or tales of horse-racing, of which he talked with a fervour entirely denied to those high political topics of which Kershaw's ardent soul was full.

Again and again did the journalist put them under his nose in their most attractive guise. In vain; Ashe

would have none of them. Till suddenly a chance word started an Indian frontier question, vastly important, and totally unknown to the English public. Ashe casually began to talk; the trickle became a stream, and presently he was holding forth with an impetuosity, a knowledge, a matured and careful judgment that fairly amazed the man beside him.

The long road, bordered by the flat fen meadows, the wide silver sky, the gently lengthening day, all passed unnoticed. The journalist found himself in the grip of a *mind*—strong, active, rich. He gave himself up with docility, yet with a growing astonishment, and when they stood once more on the steps of the house he said to his companion:

'You must have followed these matters for years. Why have you never spoken in the House, or written anything?'

Ashe's aspect changed at once.

'What would have been the good?' he said, with his easy smile. 'The fellows who didn't know wouldn't have believed me; and the fellows who knew didn't want telling.'

A shade of impatience showed in Kershaw's aspect.

'I thought,' he said, 'ours was government by discussion.'

Ashe laughed, and, turning on the steps, he pointed to the splendid gardens and finely wooded park.

'Or government by country houses—which? If you support us in this—as I gather you will—this walk will have been worth a debate,—now, won't it?'

The flattered journalist smiled, and they entered the house. From the inner hall Lord Grosville perceived them.

'Geoffrey Cliffe's arrived,' he said to Ashe, as they reached him.

'Has he?' said Ashe, and turned to go upstairs.

But Kershaw showed a lively interest. 'You mean the traveller?' he asked of his host.

'I do. As mad as usual'—said the old man. 'He and my niece Kitty make a pair.'

CHAPTER VI

When Ashe returned to the drawing-room he found it filled with the sound of talk and laughter. But it was a talk and laughter in which the Grosville family seemed to have itself but little part. Lady Grosville sat stiffly on an early-Victorian sofa, her spectacles on her nose, reading the 'Times' of the preceding day, or appearing to read it. Amy Grosville, the eldest girl, was busy in a corner, putting the finishing touches to a piece of illumination; while Caroline, seated on the floor, was showing the small child of a neighbour how to put a picture puzzle together. Lord Grosville was professedly in a further room, talking with the Austrian Count. But every other minute he strolled restlessly into the big drawing-room, and stood at the edge of the talk and laughter, only to turn on his heel again and go back to the Count, —who meanwhile appeared in the opening between the two rooms, his hands on his hips, eagerly watching Kitty Bristol and her companions, while waiting, as courtesy bade him, for the return of his host.

Ashe at once divined that the Grosville family were in revolt. Nor had he to look far to discover the cause.

Was that astonishing young lady in truth identical with the pensive figure of the morning? Kitty had doffed her black, and she wore a 'demi-toilette' gown of the utmost elegance, of which the expensiveness had, no doubt, already sunk deep into Lady Grosville's soul. At

Grosville Park the new fashion of 'tea-gowns' was not favourably regarded. It was thought to be a mere device of silly and extravagant women, and an 'afternoon dress,' though of greater pretensions than a morning gown, was still a sober affair, not in any way to be confounded with those decorative effects that nature and sound sense reserved for the evening.

But Kitty's dress was of some white silky material; and it displayed her slender throat and some portion of her thin white arms. The Dean's wife, Mrs. Winston, as she secretly studied it, felt an inward satisfaction; for here at last was one of those gowns she had once or twice gazed on with a covetous awe in the shop windows of the Rue de la Paix, brought down to earth, and clothing a simple mortal. They were then real, and they could be worn by real women; which till now the Dean's wife had scarcely believed.

Alack! how becoming were these concoctions to minxes with fair hair and sylph-like frames! Kitty was radiant, triumphant; and Ashe was certain that Lady Grosville knew it, however she might barricade herself behind the 'Times.' The girl's slim fingers gesticulated in aid of her tongue; one tiny foot swung lightly over the other; the glistening folds of the silk wrapped her in a shimmering whiteness, above which the fair head—negligently thrown back—shone out on a red background, made by the velvet chair in which she sat.

The Dean was placed close beside her and was clearly enjoying himself enormously. And in front of her, absorbed in her, engaged, indeed, in hot and furious debate with her, stood the great man who had just arrived.

'How do you do, Cliffe?' said Ashe as he approached.

Geoffrey Cliffe turned sharply; and a perfunctory greeting passed between the two men.

'When did you arrive?' said Ashe as he threw himself into an arm-chair.

'Last Tuesday. But that don't matter—' said Cliffe impatiently, 'nothing matters—except that I must somehow defeat Lady Kitty!'

And he stood, looking down upon the girl in front of him, his hands on his sides, his queer countenance twitching with suppressed laughter. An odd figure,—tall, spare, loosely jointed,—surmounted by a pale parchment face, which showed a somewhat protruding chin, a long and delicate nose, and fine brows under a strange overhanging mass of fair hair. He had the dissipated, battered look of certain Vandyck cavaliers, and certainly no handsomeness of any accepted kind. But as Ashe well knew, the aspect and personality of Geoffrey Cliffe possessed for innumerable men and women, in English 'society' and out of it, a fascination it was easier to laugh at than to explain.

Lady Kitty had eyes certainly for no one else. When he spoke of 'defeating' her, she laughed her defiance; and a glance of battle passed between her and Cliffe. Cliffe still holding her with his look, considered what new ground to break.

'What is the subject?' said Ashe.

'That men are vainer than women—' said Kitty. 'It's so true, it's hardly worth saying,—isn't it? Mr. Cliffe talks nonsense about our love of clothes—and of being admired. As if that were vanity! Of course it's only our sense of duty.'

'Duty?' cried Cliffe, twisting his moustache. 'To whom?'

'To the men, of course! If we didn't like clothes, if we didn't like being admired,—where would you be?'

'Personally, I could get on,' said Cliffe. 'You expect us to be too much on our knees.'

'As if we should ever get you there if it didn't amuse you!' said Kitty. 'Hypocrites! If we don't dress, paint, chatter and tell lies for you, you won't look at us,—and if we do——'

'Of course, it all depends on how well it's done,' threw in Cliffe.

Kitty laughed.

'That's judging by results. I look to the motive. I repeat if I powder and paint, it's not because I'm vain,—but because it's my painful duty to give you pleasure!'

'And if it doesn't give me pleasure?'

She shrugged her shoulders.

'Call me stupid then,—not vain. I ought to have done it better.'

'In any case,' said Ashe, 'it's your duty to please us?'

'Yes—' sighed Kitty. 'Worse luck!'

And she sank softly back in her chair, her eyes shining under the stimulus of the laugh that ran through her circle. The Dean joined in it uneasily, conscious no doubt of the sharp crackling movements by which in the distance Lady Grosville was dumbly expressing herself—through the 'Times.' Cliffe looked at the small figure a moment, then seized a chair, and sat down in front of her, astride.

'I wonder why you want to please us?' he said abruptly, his magnificent blue eyes upon her.

'Ah!—' said Kitty, throwing up her hands, 'if we only knew!'

'You find in it the tragedy of your sex?'

'Or comedy,' said the Dean, rising. 'I take you at your word, Lady Kitty. To-night it will be your duty to please *me*. Remember!—you promised to say us some more French.' He lifted an admonitory finger.

'I don't know any "Athalie,"' said Kitty demurely, crossing her hands upon her knee.

The Dean smiled to himself, as he crossed the room to Lady Grosville, and endeavoured by an impartial criticism of the new curate's manner and voice, as they had revealed themselves in church that morning, to distract her attention from her niece.

A hopeless task—for Kitty's personality was of the kind which absorbs, engulfs attention, do what the by-stander will. Eyes and ears were drawn perforce into the little whirlpool that she made, their owners yielding them, now with delight, now with repulsion.

Mary Lyster, for instance, came in presently fresh from a walk with Lady Edith Manley. She, too, had changed her dress. But it was a discreet and reasonable change, and Lady Grosville looked at her soft grey gown with its muslin collar and cuffs—delicately embroidered, yet of a nun-like cut and air notwithstanding—with a hot energy of approval, provoked entirely by Kitty's audacities. Mary meanwhile raised her eyebrows gently at the sight of Kitty. She swept past the group, giving a cool greeting to Geoffrey Cliffe, and presently settled herself in the further room, attended by Louis Harman and Darrell, who had just arrived by the afternoon train. Clearly she observed Kitty and observed her with dislike. The attitude of her companions was not so simple.

'What an amazing young woman!' said Harman presently, under his breath,—yet open-mouthed. 'I suppose she and Cliffe are old friends.'

'I believe they never met before,' said Mary.

Darrell laughed.

'Lady Kitty makes short work of the preliminaries,' he said, 'she told me the other night life wasn't long enough to begin with talk about the weather.'

'The weather?' said Harman. 'At the present

moment she and Cliffe seem to be discussing the *Dame aux Camélias*. Since when do they take young girls to see that kind of thing in Paris?'

Miss Lyster gave a little cough, and bending forward said to Harman: 'Lady Tranmore has shown me your picture. It is a dear delicious thing! I never saw anything more heavenly than the angel.'

Harman smiled a flattered smile. Mary Lyster referred to a copy of a Filippo Lippi Annunciation which he had just executed in water-colour for Lady Tranmore, to whom he was devoted. He was, however, devoted to a good many peeresses, with whom he took tea, and for whom he undertook many harmless and elegant services. He painted their portraits, in small size, after Pre-Raphaelite models, and he occasionally presented them with copies—a little weak, but charming—of their favourite Italian pictures. He and Mary began now to talk of Florence with much enthusiasm and many caressing adjectives. For Harman most things were 'sweet'; for Mary, 'interesting' or 'suggestive.' She talked fast and fluently; a subtle observer might have guessed she wished it to be seen that for her, Lady Kitty Bristol's flirtations, be they in or out of taste, were simply non-existent.

Darrell listened intermittently, watched Cliffe and Lady Kitty, and thought a good deal. That extraordinary girl was certainly 'carrying on' with Cliffe, as she had 'carried on' with Ashe on the night of her first acquaintance with him in St. James's Place. Ashe apparently took it with equanimity, for he was still sitting beside the pair, twisting a paper-knife and smiling, —sometimes putting in a word, but more often silent, and apparently of no account at all to either Kitty or Cliffe.

Darrell knew that the new minister disliked and despised Geoffrey Cliffe; he was aware too that Cliffe returned these sentiments, and was not unlikely to be

found attacking Ashe in public before long on certain points of foreign policy, where Cliffe conceived himself to be a master. The meeting of the two men under the Grosvilles' roof struck Darrell as curious. Why had Cliffe been invited by these very respectable and strait-laced people the Grosvilles? Darrell could only reflect that Lady Eleanor Cliffe, the traveller's mother, was probably connected with them by some of those innumerable and ever-ramifying links that hold together a certain large group of English families; and that, moreover, Lady Grosville, in spite of philanthropy and Evangelicalism, had always shown a rather pronounced taste in 'lions'—of the masculine sort. Of the women to be met with at Grosville Park, one could be certain. Lady Grosville made no excuses for her own sex. But she was a sufficiently ambitious hostess to know that agreeable parties are not constructed out of the saints alone. The men therefore must provide the sinners; and of some of the persons then most in vogue she was careful not to know too much. For socially, one must live; and, that being so, the strictness of to-day may have at any moment to be purchased by the laxity of to-morrow. Such at any rate was Darrell's analysis of the situation.

He was still astonished, however, when all was said. For Cliffe, during the preceding winter, on his return from some remarkable travels in Persia, had paused on the Riviera, and an affair at Cannes with a French Vicomtesse had got into the English papers. No one knew the exact truth of it; and a small volume of verse by Cliffe published immediately afterwards, verse very distinguished, passionate, and obscure, had offered many clues, but no solution whatever. Nobody supposed, however, that the story was anything but a bad one. Moreover, the last book of travels—which had had an enormous success—contained one of the most malicious attacks

on Foreign Missions that Darrell remembered. And if the missionaries had a supporter in England, it was Lady Grosville. Had she designs—material designs—on behalf of Miss Amy, or Miss Caroline? Darrell smiled at the notion. Cliffe must certainly marry money and was not to be captured by any Miss Amys,—or Lady Kittys either, for the matter of that.

But?—Darrell glanced at the lady beside him, and his busy thoughts took a new turn. He had seen the greeting between Miss Lyster and Cliffe. It was cold; but all the same, the world knew that they had once been friends. Was it some five years before that Miss Lyster, then in the height of a brilliant season under the wing of Lady Tranmore, had been much seen in public with Geoffrey Cliffe? Then he had departed eastwards, to explore the upper waters of the Mékong, and the gossip excited had died away. Of late her name had been rather coupled with that of William Ashe.

Well, so far as the world was concerned she might mate with either—with the mad notoriety of Cliffe, or the young distinction of Ashe. Darrell's bitter heart contracted as he reflected that only for him and the likes of him, men of the people, with average ability, and a scarcely average income, were maidens of Mary Lyster's dower and pedigree out of reach. Meanwhile he revenged himself by being her very good friend, and allowing himself at times much caustic plainness of speech in his talks with her.

'What are you three gossiping about?' said Ashe, strolling in presently from the other room to join them.

'As usual,' said Darrell. 'I am listening to perfection. Miss Lyster and Harman are discussing pictures.'

Ashe stifled a little yawn. He threw himself down by Mary, vowing that there was no more pleasure to be got

out of pictures, now that people would try to know so much about them. Mary meanwhile raised herself involuntarily to look into the further room, where the noise made by Cliffe and Lady Kitty had increased.

'They are going to sing—' said Ashe lazily—'and it won't be hymns.'

In fact, Lady Kitty had opened the piano, and had begun the first bars of something French and operatic. At the first sound of Kitty's music, however, Lady Grosville drew herself up; she closed the volume of Evangelical sermons for which she had exchanged the 'Times'; she deposited her spectacles sharply on the table beside her.

'Amy!—Caroline!'

Those young ladies rose. So did Lady Grosville. Kitty meanwhile sat with suspended fingers and laughing eyes, waiting on her aunt's movements.

'Kitty, pray don't let me interfere with your playing,' said Lady Grosville with severe politeness,—'but perhaps you would kindly put it off for half an hour. I am now going to read to the servants——'

'Gracious!' said Kitty springing up. 'I was going to play Mr. Cliffe some Offenbach.'

'Ah! But the piano can be heard in the library, and your cousin Amy plays the harmonium——'

'*Mon Dieu!*' said Kitty—'We will be as quiet as mice. Or—' she made a quick step in pursuit of her aunt. 'Shall I come and sing, Aunt Lina?'

Ashe in his shelter behind Mary Lyster fell into a silent convulsion of laughter.

'No, thank you!' said Lady Grosville, hastily. And she rustled away followed by her daughters.

Kitty came flying into the inner room, followed by Cliffe.

'What have I done?' she said breathlessly, addressing

Harman, who rose to greet her. 'Mayn't one play the piano here on Sundays?'

'That depends—' said Harman, 'on what you play.'

'Who made your English Sunday?' said Kitty impetuously—'Je vous demande—*who*?'

She threw her challenge to all the winds of heaven—standing tiptoe, her hands poised on the back of a chair, the smallest and most delicate of furies.

'A breath unmakes it, as a breath has made—' said Cliffe. 'Come and play billiards, Lady Kitty. You said just now you played.'

'Billiards!' said Harman, throwing up his hands. 'On Sunday—*here*?'

'Can they hear the balls?' said Kitty, eagerly, with a gesture towards the library.

Mary Lyster, who had been perfunctorily looking at a book, laid it down.

'It would certainly greatly distress Lady Grosville,' she said, in a voice studiously soft, but on that account perhaps all the more significant.

Kitty glanced at Mary, and Ashe saw the sudden red in her cheek. She turned provokingly to Cliffe. 'There's quite half an hour, isn't there, before one need dress——'

'More,' said Cliffe. 'Come along.'

And he made for the door, which he held open for her. It was now Mary Lyster's turn to flush—the rebuff had been so naked and unadorned. Ashe rose as Kitty passed him.

'Why don't you come too?' she said, pausing. There was a flash from eyes deep and dark beneath a pair of wilful brows. 'Aunt Lina would never be cross with *you!*'

'Thank you! I should be delighted to play buffer,

but unfortunately I have some work I must do before dinner.'

'Must you?' She looked at him uncertainly, then at Cliffe. In the dusk of the large heavily furnished room, the pale yet brilliant gold of her hair, her white dress, her slim energy and elegance drew all their eyes—even Mary Lyster's.

'I must,' Ashe repeated, smiling. 'I am glad your headache is so much better.'

'It is not in the least better!'

'Then you disguise it like a heroine.'

He stood beside her, looking down upon her, his height and strength measured against her smallness. Apparently his amused detachment, the slight dryness of his tone annoyed her. She made a tart reply and vanished through the door that Cliffe held open for her.

Ashe retired to his own room, dealt with some Foreign Office work, and then allowed himself a meditative smoke. The click of the billiard balls had ceased abruptly about ten minutes after he had begun upon his papers; there had been voices in the hall, Lord Grosville's he thought amongst them; and now all was silence.

He thought of the events of the afternoon with mingled amusement and annoyance. Cliffe was an unscrupulous fellow, and the child's head might be turned. She should be protected from him in future—he vowed she should. Lady Tranmore should take it in hand. She had been a match for Cliffe in various other directions before this.

What brought the man, with his notorious character and antecedents, to Grosville Park—one of the dwindling number of country houses in England where the old Puritan restrictions still held? It was said, he was on the look out for a post—Ashe indeed happened to know

it officially; and Lord Grosville had a good deal of influence. Moreover, failing an appointment, he was understood to be aiming at Parliament and office; and there were two safe county seats within the Grosville sphere.

'Yet even when he wants a thing, he can't behave himself, in order to get it,'—thought Ashe. 'Anybody else would have turned Sabbatarian for once, and refrained from flirting with the Grosvilles' niece. But that's Cliffe all over—and perhaps the best thing about him.'

He might have added that as Cliffe was supposed to desire an appointment under either the Foreign Office or the Colonial Office, it might have been thought to his interest to show himself more urbane than he had in fact shown himself that afternoon to the new Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs. But Ashe rarely or never indulged himself in reflections of that kind. Besides he and Cliffe knew each other too well for posing. There was a time when they had been on very friendly terms, and when Cliffe had been constantly in his mother's drawing-room. Lady Tranmore had a weakness for 'influencing' young men of family and ability; and Cliffe in fact owed her a good deal. Then she had seen cause to think ill of him; and, moreover, his travels had taken him to the other side of the world. Ashe was now well aware that Cliffe reckoned on him as a hostile influence and would not try either to deceive or to propitiate him.

He thought Cliffe had been disagreeably surprised to see him that afternoon. Perhaps it was the sudden sense of antagonism acting on the man's excitable nature that had made him fling himself into the wild nonsense he had talked with Lady Kitty!

And thenceforward Ashe's thoughts were possessed by Kitty only,—Kitty in her two aspects, of the morning, and

CLIFFE AND LADY KITTY AT THE PIANO

the afternoon. He dressed in a reverie, and went downstairs still dreaming.

At dinner he found himself responsible for Mary Lyster. Kitty was on the other side of the table, widely separated both from himself and Cliffe. She was in a little Empire dress of blue and silver, as extravagantly simple as her gown of the afternoon had been extravagantly elaborate.

Ashe observed the furtive study that the Grosville girls could not help bestowing upon her,—upon her shoulder-straps and long bare arms, upon her high waist, and the blue and silver bands in her hair. Kitty herself sat in a pensive or proud silence. The Dean was beside her, but she scarcely spoke to him, and as to the young man from the neighbourhood who had taken her in, he was to her as though he were not.

'Has there been a row?' Ashe inquired, in a low voice, of his companion.

Mary looked at him quietly.

'Lord Grosville asked them not to play—because of the servants.'

'Good!' said Ashe. 'The servants were of course playing cards in the housekeeper's room.'

'Not at all. They were singing hymns with Lady Grosville.'

Ashe looked incredulous.

'Only the slaveys and scullery maids that couldn't help themselves. Never mind. Was Lady Kitty amenable?'

'She seems to have made Lord Grosville very angry. Lady Grosville and I smoothed him down.'

'Did you?' said Ashe. 'That was nice of you.'

Mary coloured a little, and did not reply. Presently Ashe resumed.

'Aren't you as sorry for her as I am?'

'For Lady Kitty? I should think she managed to amuse herself pretty well.'

'She seems to me the most deplorable tragic little person,' said Ashe slowly.

Miss Lyster laughed.

'I really don't see it,' she said.

'Oh yes, you do,'—he persisted—'if you think a moment. Be kind to her!—won't you?'

She drew herself up, with a cold dignity.

'I confess that she has never attracted me in the least.'

Ashe returned to his dinner, dimly conscious that he had spoken like a fool.

When the ladies had withdrawn, the conversation fell on some important news from the Far East contained in the Sunday papers that Geoffrey Cliffe had brought down, and presumed to form part of the despatches which the two Ministers staying in the house had received that afternoon by Foreign Office messenger. The Government of Teheran was in one of its periodical fits of ill-temper with England; had been meddling with Afghanistan, flirting badly with Russia, and bringing ridiculous charges against the British Minister. An expedition to Bushire was talked of, and the Radical press was on the war-path. The Cabinet Minister said little. A Lord Privy Seal, reverentially credited with advising Royalty in its private affairs, need have no views on the Persian Gulf. But Ashe was appealed to and talked well. The Minister at Teheran was an old friend of his, and he described the personal attacks made on him for political reasons by the Shah and his Ministers with a humour which kept the table entertained.

Suddenly Cliffe interposed. He had been listening with restlessness, though Ashe, with pointed courtesy, had once or twice included him in the conversation. And

presently, at a somewhat dramatic moment, he met a statement of Ashe's with a direct and violent contradiction. Ashe flushed, and a duel began between the two men of which the company were soon silent spectators. Ashe had the resources of official knowledge; Cliffe had been recently on the spot, and pushed home the advantage of the eye witness with a covert insolence which Ashe bore with surprising carelessness and good temper. In the end Cliffe said some outrageous things, at which Ashe laughed; and Lord Grosville abruptly dissolved the party.

Ashe went smiling out of the dining-room, caressing a fine white spaniel, as though nothing had happened. In crossing the hall Harman found himself alone with the Dean, who looked serious and pre-occupied.

'That was a curious spectacle,' said Harman. 'Ashe's equanimity was amazing.'

'I had rather have seen him angrier,' said the Dean slowly.

'He was always a very tolerant, easy-going fellow.'

The Dean shook his head.

'A touch of *sæva indignatio* now and then would complete him.'

'Has he got it in him?'

'Perhaps not,' said the little Dean, with a flash of expression that dignified all his frail person. 'But without it, he will hardly make a great man.'

Meanwhile Geoffrey Cliffe, his strange twisted face still vindictively aglow, made his way to Kitty Bristol's corner in the drawing-room. Mary Lyster was conscious of it, conscious also of a certain look that Kitty bestowed upon the entrance of Ashe, while Cliffe was opening a battery of mingled chaff and compliments that did not at first have much effect upon her. But William Ashe threw himself into conversation with Lady Edith Manley, and was presently to all appearance happily plunged in gossip,

his tall person wholly at ease in a deep arm-chair, while Lady Edith bent over him with smiles. Meanwhile there was a certain desertion of Kitty on the part of the ladies. Lady Grosville hardly spoke to her, and the girls markedly avoided her. There was a moment when Kitty, looking round her, suddenly shook her small shoulders, and like a colt escaping from harness gave herself to riot. She and Cliffe amused themselves so well and so noisily, that the whole drawing-room was presently uneasily aware of them. Lady Grosville shot glances of wrath, rose suddenly at one moment and sat down again; her girls talked more disjointedly than ever to the gentlemen who were civilly attending them; while on the other hand Miss Lyster's flow of conversation with Louis Harman was more softly copious than usual. At last the Dean's wife looked at the Dean, a signal of kind distress; and the Dean advanced.

'Lady Kitty'—he said, taking a seat beside the pair—'Have you forgotten you promised me some French?'

Kitty turned on him a hot and mutinous face.

'Did I? What shall I say? Some Alfred de Musset?'

'No—' said the Dean. 'I think not.'

'Some—some—' she cudgelled her memory—'some Théophile Gautier?'

'No, certainly not!' said the Dean hastily.

'Well, as I don't know a word of him—' laughed Kitty.

'That was mischievous,' said the Dean, raising a finger. 'Let me suggest Lamartine!'

Kitty shook her head obstinately. 'I never learnt one line!'

'Then some of the old fellows,' said the Dean persuasively. 'I long to hear you in Corneille or Racine. That we should *all* enjoy.'

And suddenly his wrinkled hand fell kindly on the girl's small chilly fingers and patted them. Their eyes met, Kitty's wild and challenging, the Dean's full of that ætherial benevolence which blended so agreeably with his character as courtier and man of the world. There was a bright sweetness in them which seemed to say—'Poor child! I understand. But be a *little* good,—as well as clever—and all will be well.'

Suddenly Kitty's look wavered and fell. All the harshness dissolved from her thin young beauty. She turned from Cliffe, and the Dean saw her quiver with submission.

'I think I could say some "Polyeucte,"'—she said gently.

The Dean clapped his hands and rose.

'Lady Grosville,' he said, raising his voice—'Ladies and gentlemen, Lady Kitty has promised to say us some more French poetry. You remember how admirably she recited last night. But this is Sunday, and she will give us something in a different vein.'

Lady Grosville who had risen impatiently sat down again. There was a general movement; chairs were turned or drawn forward, till a circle formed. Meanwhile the Dean consulted with Kitty and resumed—

'Lady Kitty will recite a scene from Corneille's beautiful tragedy of "Polyeucte"—the scene in which Pauline, after witnessing the martyrdom of her husband who has been beheaded for refusing to sacrifice to the gods, returns from the place of execution so melted by the love and sacrifice she has beheld, that she opens her heart then and there to the same august faith, and pleads for the same death.'

The Dean seated himself, and Kitty stepped into the centre of the circle. She thought a moment, her lips moving, as though she recalled the lines. Then she

looked down at her bare arms, and dress, frowned, and suddenly approached Lady Edith Manley.

'May I have that?' she said, pointing to a lace cloak that lay on Lady Edith's knee. 'I am rather cold.'

Lady Edith handed it to her, and she threw it round her.

'Actress!' said Cliffe, under his breath, with a grin of amusement.

At any rate her impulse served her well. Her form and dress disappeared under a cloud of white. She became in a flash, so to speak, evangelised—a most innocent and spiritual apparition. Her beautiful head, her kindled and transfigured face, her little hand on the white folds, these alone remained to mingle their impression with the austere and moving tragedy which her lips recited. Her audience looked on at first with the embarrassed or hostile air which is the Englishman's natural protection against the great things of art; then for those who understood French the high passion and the noble verse began to tell; while those who could not follow were gradually enthralled by the gestures and tones with which the slight vibrating creature, whom, but ten minutes before, most of them had regarded as a mere noisy flirt, suggested and conveyed the finest and most compelling shades of love, faith, and sacrifice.

When she ceased, there was a moment's profound silence. Then Lady Edith, drawing a long breath, expressed the welcome commonplace which restored the atmosphere of daily life.

'How *could* you remember it all?'

Kitty sat down, her lip trembling scornfully.

'I had to say it every week at the convent.'

'I understand—' said Cliffe in Darrell's ear—'that last night she was Doña Sol. An accommodating young woman!'

Meanwhile Kitty looked up to find Ashe beside her. He said 'Magnificent!'—but it did not matter to her what he said. His face told her that she had moved him, and that he was incapable of any foolish chatter about it. A smile of extraordinary sweetness sprang into her eyes; and when Lady Grosville came up to thank her, the girl impetuously rose, and in the foreign way, kissed her hand, curtseying. Lord Grosville said heartily—'Upon my word, Kitty, you ought to go on the stage!'—and she smiled upon him too in a flutter of feeling, forgetting his scolding and her own impertinence, before dinner. The revulsion indeed throughout the company—with two exceptions—was complete. For the rest of the evening Kitty basked in sunshine and flattery. She met it with a joyous gentleness, and the little figure, still bedraped in white, became the centre of the room's kindness.

The Dean was triumphant.

'My dear Miss Lyster—' he said presently, finding himself near that lady. 'Did you ever hear anything better done? A most remarkable talent!'—

Mary smiled.

'I am wondering—' she said—'what they teach you in French convents—and why! It is all so singular—isn't it?'

Late that night, Ashe entered his room—before his usual time, however. He had tired even of Lord Grosville's chat, and had left the smoking-room still talking. Indeed, he wished to be alone, and there was that in his veins which told him that a new motive had taken possession of his life.

He sat beside the open window reviewing the scenes and feelings of the day—his interview with Kitty in the morning—the teasing coquette of the afternoon—the

inspired poetic child of the evening. Rapidly, but none the less strongly and steadfastly he made up his mind. He would ask Kitty Bristol to marry him, and he would ask her immediately.

Why? He scarcely knew her. His mother, his family would think it madness. No doubt it was madness. Yet, as far as he could explain his impulse himself, it depended on certain fundamental facts in his own nature,—it was in keeping with his deepest character. He had an inbred love of the difficult, the unconventional in life, of all that piqued and stimulated his own superabundant consciousness of resource and power. And he had a tenderness of feeling, a gift of chivalrous pity, only known to the few, which was in truth always hungrily on the watch, like some starved faculty that cannot find its outlet. The thought of this beautiful child, in the hands of such a mother as Madame d'Estrées, and rushing upon risks illustrated by the half-mocking attentions of Geoffrey Cliffe, did in truth wring his heart. With a strange imaginative clearness he foresaw her future, he beheld her the prey at once of some bad fellow and of her own temperament. She would come to grief; he saw the prescience of it in her already; and what a waste would be there!

No!—he would step in,—capture her before these ways and whims, now merely bizarre or foolish, stiffened into what might in truth destroy her. His pulse quickened as he thought of the development of this beauty, the ripening of this intelligence. Never yet had he seen a girl whom he much wished to marry. He was easily repelled by stupidity, still more by mere amiability. Some touch of acid, of roughness in the fruit,—that drew him, in politics, thought, love. And, if she married him, he vowed to himself, proudly, that she would find him no tyrant. Many a man might marry her, who would then fight her

and try to break her. All that was most fastidious and characteristic in Ashe revolted from such a notion. With him she should have *freedom*—whatever it might cost. He asked himself deliberately, whether after marriage he could see her flirting with other men, as she had flirted that day with Cliffe, and still refrain from coercing her. And his question was answered, or rather put aside, first by the confidence of nascent love,—he would love her so well and so royally that she would naturally turn to him for counsel; and then by the clear perception that she was a creature of mind rather than sense, governed mainly by the caprices and curiosities of the *intelligence*, combined with a rather cold indifferent temperament. One moment throwing herself wildly into a dangerous or exciting intimacy,—the next, parting with a laugh, and without a regret,—it was thus he saw her in the future, even as a wife. 'She may scandalise half the world'—he said to himself stubbornly,—'I shall understand her!'

But his mother?—his friends?—his colleagues? He knew well his mother's ambitions for him, and the place that he held in her heart. Could he without cruelty impose upon her such a daughter as Kitty Bristol? Well!—his mother had a very large experience of life, and much natural independence of mind. He trusted her to see the promise in this untamed and gifted creature; he counted on the sense of power that Lady Tranmore possessed, and which would but find new scope in the taming of Kitty.

But Kitty's mother? Kitty must of course be rescued from Madame d'Estrées,—must find a new and truer mother in Lady Tranmore. But money would do it; and money must be lavished.

Then, almost for the first time, Ashe felt a conscious delight in wealth and birth. *Panache*? He could give it her—the little, wild, lovely thing! Luxury, society,

adoration,—all should be hers. She should be so loved and cherished, she must needs love in return.

His dreams were delicious; and the sudden fear into which he fell at the end lest after all Kitty should mock and turn from him, was only in truth another pleasure. No delay! Circumstances might develop at any moment, and sweep her from him. Now or never must he snatch her from difficulty and disgrace—let hostile tongues wag as they pleased—and make her his.

His political future? He knew well the influence which, in these days of universal publicity, a man's private affairs may have on his public career. And in truth his heart was in that career, and the thought of endangering it hurt him. Certainly it would recommend him to nobody that he should marry Madame d'Estrées' daughter. On the other hand what favour did he want of anybody?—save what work, and 'knowing more than the other fellows' might compel? The cynic in him was well aware that he had already what other men fought for—family, money, and position. Society must accept his wife; and Kitty, once mellowed by happiness and praise, might live, laugh, and rattle as she pleased.

As to strangeness and caprice, the modern world delights in them; 'the violent take it by force.' There is indeed a dividing line; but it was a love-marriage that should keep Kitty on the safe side of it.

He stood lost in a very ecstasy of resolve, when suddenly there was a sharp movement outside, and a flash of white among the yew hedges bordering the formal garden on which his windows looked. The night outside was still and veiled, but of the flash of white he was certain—and of a step on the gravel.

Something fell beside him, thrown from outside. He picked it up, and found a flower weighted by a stone, tied into a fold of ribbon.

'Madcap!—' he said to himself, his heart beating to suffocation.

Then he stole out of his room, and down a small winding staircase which led directly to the garden and a door beside the orangery. He had to unbolt the door, and as he did so, a dog in one of the basement rooms began to bark. But there could be no flinching, though the whole thing was of an imprudence which pricked his conscience. To slip along the shadowed side of the orangery, to cross the space of clouded light beyond, and gain the darkness of the ilex avenue beyond was soon done. Then he heard a soft laugh, and a little figure fled before him. He followed and overtook.

Kitty Bristol turned upon him.

'Didn't I throw straight?' she said triumphantly. 'And they say girls can't throw.'

'But why did you throw at all?' he said, capturing her hand.

'Because I wanted to talk to you. And I was restless and couldn't sleep. Why did you never come and talk to me this afternoon? And why'—she beat her foot angrily—'did you let me go and play billiards alone with Mr. Cliffe?'

'Let you!' cried Ashe, 'as if anybody could have prevented you!'

'One sees of course that you detest Mr. Cliffe,' said the whiteness beside him.

'I didn't come here to talk about Geoffrey Cliffe. I *won't* talk about him! Though of course you must know——'

'That I flirted with him abominably all the afternoon? *C'est vrai—c'est ab-sol-ument vrai!* And I shall always want to flirt with him, wherever I am—and whatever I may be doing.'

'Do as you please,' said Ashe drily, 'but I think you will get tired.'

'No, no—he excites me! He is bad, false, selfish, but he excites me. He talks to very few women—one can see that. And all the women want to talk to him. He used to admire Miss Lyster, and now he dislikes her. But she doesn't dislike him. No! she would marry him to-morrow if he asked her.'

'You are very positive,' said Ashe. 'Allow me to say that I entirely disagree with you.'

'You don't know anything about her,' said the teasing voice.

'She is my cousin, mademoiselle.'

'What does that matter? I know much more than you do, though I have only seen her two days. I know that—well, I am afraid of her!'

'Afraid of her? Did you come out—may I ask?—determined to talk nonsense?'

'I came out——never mind! I *am* afraid of her. She hates me. I think'—he felt a shiver in the air—'she will do me harm if she can.'

'No one shall do you harm,' said Ashe, his tone changing—'if you will only trust yourself—— '

She laughed merrily.

'To you? Oh! you'd soon throw it up.'

'Try me!' he said, approaching her. 'Lady Kitty, I have something to say to you.'

Suddenly she shrank away from him. He could not see her face, and had nothing to guide him.

'I haven't yet known you three weeks,' he said, overmastered by something passionate and profound. 'I don't know what you will say—whether you can put up with me. But I know my own mind—I shall not change. I—I love you. I ask you to marry me.'

A silence. The night seemed to have grown darker.

Then a small hand seized his, and two soft lips pressed themselves upon it. He tried to capture her, but she evaded him.

'You—you really and actually—want to marry me?'

'I do, Kitty, with all my heart.'

'You remember about my mother—about Alice?'

'I remember everything. We would face it together.'

'And—you know what I told you about my bad temper?'

'Some nonsense, wasn't it? But I should be bored by the domestic dove. I want the hawk, Kitty, with its quick wings, and its daring bright eyes.'

She broke from him with a cry.

'You must listen. I *have*—a wicked, odious, ungovernable temper—I should make you miserable.'

'Not at all,—' said Ashe. 'I should take it very calmly. I am made that way.'

'And then—I don't know how to put it—but I have fancies—overpowering fancies—and I must follow them. I have one now for Geoffrey Cliffe!'

Ashe laughed.

'Oh that won't last.'

'Then some other will come after it. And I can't help it. It is my head—' she tapped her forehead lightly—'that seems on fire.'

Ashe at last slipped his arm round her.

'But it is your heart—you will give me.'

She pushed him away from her and held him at arm's length.

'You are very rich, aren't you?' she said in a muffled voice.

'I am well off. I can give you all the pretty things you want.'

'And some day you will be Lord Tranmore?'

'Yes, when my poor father dies,' he said sighing. He

felt her fingers caress his hand again. It was a spirit touch, light and tender.

'And everyone says you are so clever—you have such prospects. Perhaps you will be Prime Minister.'

'Well there's no saying—' he threw out laughing.—'if you'll come and help.'

He heard a sob.

'Help! I should be the ruin of you. I should spoil everything. You don't know the mischief I can do. And I can't help it, it's in my blood.'

'You would like the game of politics too much to spoil it, Kitty.' His voice broke and lingered on the name. 'You would want to be a great lady and lead the party.'

'Should I? Could you ever teach me how to behave?'

'You would learn by nature. Do you know, Kitty, how clever you are?'

'Yes—' she sighed. 'I am clever. But there is always something that hinders—that brings failure.'

'How old are you?' he said laughing; 'eighteen—or eighty?'

Suddenly he put out his arms, enfolding her. And she, still sobbing, raised her hands, clasped them round his neck, and clung to him like a child.

'Oh! I knew—I knew—when I first saw your face. I had been so miserable all day—and then you looked at me—and I wanted to tell you all. Oh I adore you'—I adore you!' Their faces met. Ashe tasted a moment of rapture; and knew himself free at last of the great company of poets and of lovers.

They slipped back to the house, and Ashe saw her disappear by a door on the further side of the orangery,—noiselessly, without a sound. Except that just at the last she drew him to her and breathed a scared whisper in his ear.

'Oh! what—what will Lady Tranmore say?'

Then she fled. But she left her question behind her, and when the dawn came, Ashe found that he had spent half the night in trying anew to frame some sort of an answer to it.

PART II

THREE YEARS AFTER

'The world an ancient murderer is'

CHAPTER VII

'HER ladyship will be in before six, my lady—I was to be sure and ask you to wait, if you came before, and to tell you that her ladyship had gone to Madame Fanchette about her dress for the ball.'

So said Lady Kitty's maid. Lady Tranmore hesitated, then said she would wait, and asked that Master Henry might be brought down.

The maid went for the child, and Lady Tranmore entered the drawing-room. The Ashes had been settled since their marriage in a house in Hill Street,—a house to which Kitty had lost her heart at first sight. It was old and distinguished, covered here and there with eighteenth-century decoration, once no doubt a little florid and coarse beside the finer work of the period, but now agreeably blunted and mellowed by time. Kitty had had her impetuous and decided way with the furnishing of it; and though Lady Tranmore professed to admire it, the result was in truth too French and too pagan for her taste. Her own room reflected the rising worship of Morris and Burne-Jones, of which indeed she had been an adept from the beginning. Her walls were covered by the well-known pomegranate, or jessamine, or sunflower patterns; her hangings were of a mystic greenish-blue; her pictures were drawn either from the Italian primitives, or their modern followers. Celtic romance, Christian symbolism, all that was touching, other-worldly and

obscure,—our late English form in fact of the great Romantic reaction,—it was amid influences of this kind that Lady Tranmore lived and fed her own imagination. The dim, suggestive, and pathetic; twilight rather than dawn, autumn rather than spring; yearning rather than fulfilment; 'the gleam' rather than noon-day:—it was in this half-lit richly coloured sphere that she and most of her friends saw the tent of Beauty pitched.

But Kitty would have none of it. She quoted French sceptical remarks about the legs and joints of the Burne-Jones knights; she declared that so much pattern made her dizzy; and that the French were the only nation in the world who understood a salon, whether as upholstery or conversation. Accordingly, in days when these things were rare, the girl of eighteen made her new husband provide her with white-panelled walls, lightly gilt, and with a Persian carpet of which the mass was of a plain blackish-grey, and only the border was allowed to flower. A few Louis Quinze girandoles on the walls, a Vernis-Martin screen, an old French clock, two or three inlaid cabinets, and a collection of lightly built chairs and settees in the French mode—this was all she would allow; and while Lady Tranmore's room was always crowded, Kitty's, which was much smaller, had always an air of space. French books were scattered here and there; and only one picture was admitted. That was a Watteau sketch of a group from 'L'Embarquement pour Cythère.' Kitty adored it; Lady Tranmore thought it absurd and disagreeable.

As she entered the room now, on this May afternoon, she looked round it with her usual distaste. On several of the chairs, large illustrated books were lying. They contained pictures of seventeenth and eighteenth century costume,—one of them displayed a coloured engraving of a brilliant Madame de Pompadour, by Boucher.

The maid who followed her into the room began to remove the books.

'Her ladyship has been choosing her costume, my lady,' she explained, as she closed some of the volumes.

'Is it settled?' said Lady Tranmore.

The maid replied that she believed so, and bringing a volume which had been laid aside with a mark in it, she opened on a fantastic plate of Madame de Longueville, as Diana, in a gorgeous hunting-dress.

Lady Tranmore looked at it in silence, she thought it unseemly, with its bare ankles and sandalled feet, and likely to be extremely expensive. For this Diana of the Fronde sparkled with jewels from top to toe, and Lady Tranmore felt certain that Kitty had already made William promise her the counterpart of the magnificent diamond crescent that shone in the coiffure of the goddess.

'It really seemed to be the only one that suited her ladyship!' said the maid in a deprecating voice.

'I dare say it will look very well,' said Lady Tranmore. 'And Fanchette is to make it?'

'If her ladyship is not too late,' said the maid smiling. 'But she has taken such a long time to make up her mind——'

'And Fanchette of course is driven to death. All the world seems to have gone mad about this ball.'

Lady Tranmore shrugged her shoulders in a slight disgust. She was not going. Since her elder son's death, she had had no taste for spectacles of the kind. But she knew very well that fashionable London was talking and thinking of nothing else; she heard that the print-room of the British Museum was every day besieged by an eager crowd of fair ladies, claiming the services of the museum officials from dewy morn till eve; that historic costumes and famous jewels were to be lavished on the affair; that those who were not invited had not

even the resource of contempt, so unquestioned and indubitable was the prospect of a really magnificent spectacle; and that the dressmakers of Paris and London, if they survived the effort, would reap a marvellous harvest.

'And Mr. Ashe—do you know if he is going after all?' she asked of the maid as the latter was retreating.

'Mr. Ashe says he will, if he may wear just court-dress—' said the maid smiling—'Not unless. And her ladyship's afraid it won't be allowed.'

'She'll make him go in costume,' thought Lady Tranmore. 'And he will do it, or anything,—to avoid a scene.'

The maid retired, and Lady Tranmore was left alone. As she sat waiting a thought occurred to her. She rang for the butler.

'Where is the "Times"?' she asked when he appeared. The man replied that it was, no doubt, in Mr. Ashe's room and he would bring it.

'Kitty has probably not looked at it,' thought the visitor. When the paper arrived she turned at once to the Parliamentary report. It contained an important speech by Ashe, in the House, the night before. Lady Tranmore had been disturbed in the reading of it that morning, and had still a few sentences to finish. She read them with pride, then glanced again at the leading article on the debate, and at the flattering references it contained to the knowledge, courtesy, and debating power of the Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs.

'Mr. Ashe,' said the 'Times,' 'has well earned the promotion he is now sure to receive before long. In those important rearrangements of some of the higher offices which cannot be long delayed, Mr. Ashe is clearly marked out for a place in the Cabinet. He is young, but

he has already done admirable service; and there can be no question that he has a great future before him.'

Lady Tranmore put down the paper and fell into a reverie. A great future?—yes!—if Kitty permitted—if Kitty could be managed. At present it appeared to William's mother that the caprices of his wife were endangering the whole development of his career. There were wheels within wheels, and the newspapers knew very little about them.

Three years, was it, since the marriage? She looked back to her dismay when William brought her the news, though it seemed to her that in some sort she had foreseen it from the moment of his first mention of Kitty Bristol,—with its eager appeal to her kindness, and that new and indefinable something in voice and manner which put her at once on the alert.

Ought she to have opposed it more strongly? She had indeed opposed it; and for a whole wretched week she who had never yet gainsaid him in anything had argued and pleaded with her son,—attempting at the same time to bring in his uncles to wrestle with him, seeing that his poor paralysed father was of no account,—and so to make a stubborn family fight of it. But she had been simply disarmed and beaten down by William's sweetness, patience, and good humour. Never had he been so determined; and never so lovable.

It had been made abundantly plain to her that no wife however exacting and adorable should ever rob her, his mother, of one tittle of his old affection; nay, that, would she only accept Kitty, only take the little forlorn creature into the shelter of her motherly arms, even a more tender and devoted attention than before, on the part of her son, would be surely hers. He spoke, moreover, the language of sound sense about his proposed bride. That he was in love, passionately in love, was evident; but there were

moments when he could discuss Kitty, her family, her bringing up, her gifts and defects, with the same cool acumen, the same detachment, apparently, he might have given, say, to the Egyptian or the Balkan problem. Lady Tranmore was not invited to bow before a divinity; she was asked to accept a very gifted and lovely child, often troublesome and provoking, but full of a glorious promise which only persons of discernment, like herself and Ashe, could fully realise. He told her, with a laugh, that she could never have behaved even tolerably to a stupid daughter-in-law. Whereas—let London, and society, and a few years of love and living do their work, and Kitty would make one of the leading women of her time, as Lady Tranmore had been before her. 'You'll help her, you'll train her, you'll put her in the way—' he had said, kissing his mother's hand. 'And you'll see that, in the end, we shall both of us be so conceited to have had the making of her there'll be no holding us!'

Well, she had yielded!—of course she had yielded. She had explained the matter, so far as she could, to the dazed wits of her paralysed husband. She had propitiated the family on both sides; she had brought Kitty to stay with her, and had advised on the negotiations which banished Madame d'Estrées from London and the British Isles, in return for a handsome allowance, and the payment of her debts; and finally she had with difficulty allowed the Grosvilles to provide the trousseau and arrange the marriage from Grosville Park, so eager had she grown in her accepted task.

And there had been many hours of high reward. Kitty had thrown herself at first upon William's mother with all the effusion possible. She had been docile, caressing, brilliant. Lady Tranmore had become almost as proud of her gifts, her social effect, and her fast advancing beauty, as Ashe himself. Kitty's whims and

humours; her passion for this person, and her hatred of that; her love of splendour and indifference to debt; her contempt of opinion and restraint, seemed to her, as to Ashe, the mere crude growth of youth. When she looked at Ashe, so handsome, agreeable and devoted, at his place and prestige in the world, his high intelligence and his personal attraction, Ashe's mother must needs think that Kitty's mere cleverness would soon reveal to her her extraordinary good fortune; and that whereas he was now at her feet, she before long would be at his.

Three years! Lady Tranmore looked back upon them with feelings that wavered like smoke before a wind. A year of excitement,—a year of illness,—a year of extravagance, shaken moreover by many strange gusts of temper and caprice,—it was so she might have summarised them. First, a most promising début in London. Kitty welcomed on all hands with enthusiasm as Ashe's wife, and her own daughter-in-law,—fêted to the top of her bent, smiled on at Court, flattered by the country houses, always exquisitely dressed, smiling and eager, apparently full of ambition for Ashe no less than for herself, a happy, notorious, busy little person, with a touch of wildness that did but give edge to her charm and keep the world talking.

Then,—the birth of the boy, and Kitty's passionate, ungovernable recoil from the deformity that showed itself almost immediately after his birth,—a form of infantile paralysis involving a slight but incurable lameness. Lady Tranmore could recall weeks of remorseful fondling, alternating with weeks of neglect; continued illness and depression on Kitty's part, settling after a while into a petulant melancholy for which the baby's defect seemed but an inadequate cause; Ashe's tender anxiety, his willingness to throw up Parliament, office, everything, that Kitty might travel and recover; and those huge efforts by which

she and his best friends in the House had held him back,—when Kitty, it seemed, cared little or nothing whether he sacrificed his future or not. Finally she herself, with the assistance of a new friend of Kitty's, had become Kitty's nurse, had taken her abroad when Ashe could not be spared, had watched over her, and humoured her, and at last brought her back—so the doctors said—restored.

Was it really recovery? At any rate Lady Tranmore was often inclined to think that since the return to London,—now about a twelvemonth since,—both she and William had had to do with a different Kitty. Young as she still was, the first exquisite softness of the expanding life was gone; things harder, stranger, more inexplicable than any which those who knew her best had yet perceived, seemed now and then to come to the surface, like wreckage in a summer sea.

The opening door disturbed these ponderings. The nurse appeared, carrying the little boy. Lady Tranmore took him on her knee and caressed him. He was a piteous, engaging child, generally very docile, but liable at times to storms of temper, out of all proportion to the fragility of his small person. His grandmother was inclined to look upon his passions as something external and inflicted,—the entering in of the Blackwater devil to plague a tiny creature, that normally was of a divine and clinging sweetness. She would have taught him religion, as his only shield against himself; but neither his father nor his mother was religious; and Harry was likely to grow up a pagan.

He leant now against her breast, and she, whose inmost nature was maternity, delighted in the pressure of the tiny body, crooning songs to him when they were left alone, and pausing now and then to pity and kiss the little shrunken foot that hung beside the other.

She was interrupted by a soft entrance and the rustle of a dress.

'Ah!—Margaret!' she said, looking round and smiling.

The girl who had come in, approached her, shook hands, and looked down at the baby. She was fair-haired and wore spectacles; her face was round and childish, her eyes round and blue—with certain lines about them, however, which showed that she was no longer in her first youth.

'I came to see if I could do anything to-day for Kitty. I know she is very busy about the ball——'

'Head over ears apparently,' said Lady Tranmore,—'Everybody has lost their wits—I see Kitty has chosen her dress.'

'Yes, if Fanchette can make it all right. Poor Kitty!—She has been in such a state of mind.—I think I'll go on with these invitations!'

And, taking off her gloves and hat, Margaret French went to the writing-table like one intimately acquainted with the room and its affairs, took up a pile of cards and envelopes which lay upon it, and bringing them to Lady Tranmore's side began to work upon them.

'I did about half yesterday,' she explained,—'but I see Kitty hasn't been able to touch them, and it is really time they were out.'

'For their party next week?'

'Yes. I hope Kitty won't tire herself out. It has been a rush lately.'

'Does she ever rest?'

'Never!—as far as I can see. And I am afraid she has been very much worried.'

'About that silly affair with Prince Stephan?' said Lady Tranmore.

Margaret French nodded. 'She vows that she meant

no harm, and did no harm,—and that it has been all malice and exaggeration. But one can see she has been hurt.'

'Well, if you ask me,' said Lady Tranmore in a low voice,—'I think she deserved to be.'

Their eyes met,—the girl's full of a half smiling, half soft consideration. Lady Tranmore, on the other hand, had flushed proudly, as though the mere mention of the matter to which she had referred had been galling to her. Kitty in fact had just been guilty of an escapade which had set the town talking, and even found its way here and there into the newspapers. The heir to a European monarchy had been recently visiting London. A romantic interest surrounded him; for a lady, not of a rank sufficiently high to mate with his, had lately drowned herself for love of him, and the young man's melancholy good looks, together with the magnificent apathy of his manner, drew after him a train of gossip. Kitty failed to meet him in society; certain invitations that for once she coveted did not arrive; and in a fit of pique she declared that she would make acquaintance with him in her own way. On a certain occasion, when the princeling was at the play, his attention was drawn to a small and dazzling creature in a box opposite his own. Presently, however, there was a commotion in this box. The dazzling creature had fainted; and rumour sent round the name of Lady Kitty Ashe. The Prince despatched an equerry to make inquiries, and the inquiries were repeated that evening in Hill Street. Recovery was prompt, and the Prince let it be known that he wished to meet the lady. Invitations from high quarters descended upon Kitty; she bore herself with an engaging carelessness, and the melancholy youth was soon spending far more pains upon her than he had yet been known to spend upon any other English beauties presented to him. Ashe, and Kitty's

friends laughed; the old General in charge of the princeling took alarm. And presently Kitty's audacities, alack, carried away her discretion; she began, moreover, to boast of her ruse. Whispers crept round; and the General's ears were open. In a few days Kitty's triumph went the way of all earthly things. At a Court ball, to which her vanity had looked forward, unwarned, the Prince passed her with glassy eyes, returning the barest bow to her smiling curtsey. She betrayed nothing; but somehow the thing got out, and set in motion a perfect hurricane of talk. It was rumoured that the old Prime Minister, Lord Parham, had himself said a caustic word to Lady Kitty; that Royalty was annoyed; and that William Ashe had for once scolded his wife seriously.

Lady Tranmore was well aware that there was at any rate no truth in the last report: but she also knew that there was a tone of sharpness in the London chatter, that was new with regard to Kitty. It was as though a certain indulgence was wearing out; and what had been amusement was passing into criticism.

She and Margaret French discussed the matter a little, *sotto voce*, while Margaret went on with the invitations, and Lady Tranmore made a French toy dance and spin for the babe's amusement. Their tone was one of close and friendly intimacy, an intimacy based clearly upon one common interest,—their relation to Kitty. Margaret French was one of those beings in whom, for our salvation, this halting, hurried world of ours is still on the whole rich. She was unmarried, thirty-five, and poor. She lived with her brother, a struggling doctor, and she had come across Kitty in the first months of Kitty's married life, on some fashionable Soldiers' Aid Committee where Margaret had done the work, and Kitty with the other great ladies had reaped the fame. Kitty had developed a fancy for her, and presently could not

live without her. But Margaret, though it soon became evident that she had taken Kitty and, in due time, the child —Ashe too for the matter of that!—deep into her generous heart, preserved a charming measure in the friendship offered her. She would owe Kitty nothing, either socially or financially. When Kitty's smart friends appeared, she vanished. Nobody in her own world ever heard her mention the name of Lady Kitty Ashe, largely as that name was beginning to figure in the gossip of the day. But there were few things concerning the Hill Street ménage that Lady Tranmore could not safely and rightly discuss with her; and even Ashe himself went to her for counsel.

'I am afraid this has made things worse than ever with the Parhams!' said Lady Tranmore presently.

Margaret shook her head anxiously.

'I hope Kitty won't throw over their dinner next week.'

'She is talking of it!'

'Yesterday she had almost made up her mind,—' said Margaret reluctantly. 'Perhaps you will persuade her. But she has been terribly angry with Lord Parham—and with Lady P. too!'

'And it was to be a reconciliation dinner, after the old nonsense between her and Lady Parham,' sighed Lady Tranmore.—'It was planned for Kitty entirely. And she is to act something, isn't she, with that young De La Rivière from the Embassy? I believe the Princess is coming—expressly to meet her. I have been hearing of it on all sides. She *can't* throw it over!'

Margaret shrugged her shoulders. 'I believe she will.'

The older lady's face showed a sudden cloud of indignation.

'William must really put his foot down,' she said in a low decided voice. 'It is of course most important—just now——'

She said no more, but Margaret French looked up, and they exchanged glances.

'Let's hope—' said Margaret, 'that Mr. Ashe will be able to pacify her. Ah! there she is.'

For the front door closed heavily, and instantly the house was aware from top to toe of a flutter of talk and a frou-frou of skirts. Kitty ran up the stairs and into the drawing-room still talking, apparently to the footman behind her,—and stopped short at the sight of Lady Tranmore and Margaret. A momentary shadow passed across her face; then she came forward all smiles.

'Why, they never told me downstairs!' she said, taking a hand of each caressingly, and slipping into a seat between them. 'Have I lost much of you?'

'Well, I must soon be off,' said Lady Tranmore,—'Harry has been entertaining me.'

'Oh! Harry!—is he there?' said Kitty in another voice, perceiving the child behind his grandmother's dress as he sat on the floor, where Lady Tranmore had just deposited him.

The baby turned towards his beautiful mother, and as he saw her, a little wandering smile began to spread from his uncertain lips to his deep-brown eyes, till his whole face shone, held to hers as to a magnet, in a still enchantment.

'Come!' said Kitty, holding out her hands.

With difficulty the child pulled himself towards her, moving in sideway fashion along the floor, and dragging the helpless foot after him. Again the shadow crossed Kitty's face. She caught him up, kissed him and moved to ring the bell.

'Shall I take him upstairs?' said Margaret.

'Why, he seems to have only just come down!' said Lady Tranmore. 'Must he go?'

'He can come down again afterwards,' said Kitty. 'I want to talk to you. Take him, Margaret.'

The babe went without a whimper, still following his mother with his eyes.

'He looks rather frail,' said Lady Tranmore—'I hope you'll soon be sending him to the country, Kitty.'

'He's very well,' said Kitty. Then she took off her hat and looked at the invitations Margaret had been writing.

'Heavens!—I had forgotten all about them. What an angel is Margaret! I really can't remember these things! They ought to do themselves by clockwork. And now Fanchette and this ball are enough to drive one wild!'

She lifted her hands to her face and pressed back the masses of fair hair that were tumbling round it, with a gesture of weariness.

'Fanchette can make your dress?'

'She says she will, but I couldn't make her understand anything I wanted. She is off her head! They all are. By the way, did you hear of Madeleine Alcot's telegram to Worth?'

'No.'

Kitty laughed—a laugh musical but malicious. Mrs. Alcot, married in the same month as herself, had been her companion and rival from the beginning. They called each other 'Kitty' and 'Madeleine' and saw each other frequently; why, Lady Tranmore could never discover, unless on the principle that it is best to keep your enemy under observation.

'She telegraphed to Worth as soon as her invitation arrived, "Envoyez tout de suite costume Vénus. Réponse." The answer came at dinner—she had a dinner-party—and she read it aloud: "Remercîments. Il n'y en a pas." Isn't it delightful?'

'Very neat!' said Lady Tranmore smiling—'When did you invent that? You, I hear, are to be Diana?'

Kitty made a gesture of despair.

'Ask Fanchette!—it depends on her. There is no one but she in London who can do it. Oh! by the way,—what's Mary going to be? I suppose a Madonna of sorts.'

'Not at all,' said Lady Tranmore dryly;—'she has chosen a Sir Joshua costume I found for her.'

'A vocation missed,' said Kitty, shaking her head. 'She ought to have been a "Vestal Virgin" at least.... Do you know that you look *such* a duck this afternoon!' The speaker put up two small hands and pulled and patted at the black lace strings of Lady Tranmore's hat, which were tied under the delicately wrinkled white of her very distinguished chin.

'This hat suits you so,—you are such a *grande dame* in it!—Ah! Je t'adore!'

And Kitty softly took the chin aforesaid into her hands, and dropped a kiss on Lady Tranmore's cheek, which reddened a little under the sudden caress.

'Don't be a goose, Kitty!' But Elizabeth Tranmore stooped forward all the same, and returned the kiss heartily. 'Now tell me what you're going to wear at the Parhams.'

Kitty rose deliberately, went to the bell and rang it.

'It must be quite time for tea!'

'You haven't answered my question, Kitty.'

'Haven't I?' The butler entered. 'Tea, please, Wilson, at once.'

'Kitty!——'

Lady Kitty seated herself defiantly a short distance from her mother-in-law and crossed her hands on her lap.

'I am not going to the Parhams'.'

'Kitty!—what do you mean?'

'I am not going to the Parhams',' repeated Kitty slowly. 'They should behave a little more considerately

to me if they want to get me to amuse their guests for them!'

At this moment Margaret French re-entered the room. Lady Tranmore turned to her with a gesture of distress.

'Oh, Margaret knows,' said Kitty. 'I told her yesterday.'

'The Parhams?' said Margaret.

Kitty nodded. Margaret paused, with her hand on the back of Lady Tranmore's chair, and there was a short silence. Then Lady Tranmore began,—in a tone that endeavoured not to be too serious—

'I don't know how you're going to get out of it, my dear. Lady Parham has asked the Princess, first because she wished to come, secondly as an olive branch to you. She has taken the greatest pains about the dinner; and afterwards there is to be an evening party to hear you, just the right size, and just the right people.'

'Cela m'est égal,' said Kitty, 'par-faite-ment égal! I am not going.'

'What possible excuse can you invent?'

'I shall have a cold,—the most atrocious cold imaginable. I take to my bed just two hours before it is time to dress. My letter reaches Lady Parham on the stroke of eight.'

'Kitty!—you would be doing a thing perfectly unheard of—most rude—most unkind!'

The stiff slight figure, like a strained wand, did not waver for a moment before the grave indignation of the older woman.

'I should for once be paying off a score that has run on too long.'

'You and Lady Parham had agreed to make friends, and let bygones be bygones.'

'That was before last week.'

'Before Lord Parham said—what annoyed you?'

Kitty's eyes flamed.

'Before Lord Parham humiliated me in public,—or tried to.'

'Dear Kitty!—he was annoyed, and said a sharp thing; but he is an old man, and for William's sake surely you can forgive it. And Lady Parham had nothing to do with it.'

'She has not written to me to apologise,' said Kitty, with a most venomous calm. 'Don't talk about it, mother. It will hurt you,—and I am determined. Lady Parham has patronised or snubbed me ever since I married,—when she hasn't been setting my best friends against me. She is false, false, *false*!'—Kitty struck her hands together with an emphatic gesture. 'And Lord Parham said a thing to me last week I shall never forgive. *Voilà*! Now I mean to have done with it!'

'And you choose to forget altogether that Lord Parham is William's political chief?—that William's affairs are in a critical state, and everything depends on Lord Parham—that it is not seemly, not possible, that William's wife should publicly slight Lady Parham, and through her the Prime Minister—at this moment of all moments!'

Lady Tranmore breathed fast.

'William will not expect me to put up with insults,' said Kitty, also beginning to show emotion.

'But can't you see that—just now especially—you ought to think of nothing—*nothing*, but William's future and William's career?'

'William will never purchase his career at my expense.'

'Kitty dear, listen,'—cried Lady Tranmore in despair, and she threw herself into arguments and appeals to

which Kitty listened quite unmoved for some twenty minutes. Margaret French, feeling herself an uncomfortable third, tried several times to steal away. In vain. Kitty's peremptory hand retained her. She could not escape, much as she wished it, from the wrestle between the two women;—on the one side the mother, noble, already touched with age, full of dignity and protesting affection,—on the other the wife, still little more than a child in years, vibrating through all her slender frame with passion and insolence, more beautiful than usual by virtue of the very fire which possessed her,—a Mænad at bay.

Lady Tranmore had just begun to waver in a final despair, when the door opened and William Ashe entered.

He looked in astonishment at his mother and wife. Then in a flash he understood, and with an involuntary gesture of fatigue, he turned to go.

'William!' cried his mother, hurrying after him,—'don't go. Kitty and I were disputing; but it is nothing, dear! Don't go, you look so tired. Can you stay for dinner?'

'Well, that was my intention,' said Ashe with a smile, as he allowed himself to be brought back. 'But Kitty seems in the clouds.'

For Kitty had not moved an inch to greet him. She sat in a high-backed chair, one foot crossed over the other, one hand supporting her cheek, looking straight before her with shining eyes.

Lady Tranmore laid a hand on her shoulder.

'We won't talk any more about it now, Kitty, will we?'

Kitty's pinched lips opened enough to emit the words:—

'Perhaps William had better understand——'

'Goodness!' cried Ashe. 'Is it the Parhams? Send

them, Kitty, if you please, to ten thousand *diables*! You won't go to their dinner? Well, don't go! Please yourself—and hang the expense! Come and give me some dinner—there's a dear.'

He bent over her, and kissed her hair.

Lady Tranmore began to speak, then with a mighty effort restrained herself and began to look for her parasol. Kitty did not move. Lady Tranmore said a muffled good-bye and went. And this time Margaret French insisted on going with her.

When Ashe returned to the drawing-room, he found his wife still in the same position, very pale and very wild.

'I have told your mother, William, what I intend to do about the Parhams.'

'Very well, dear. Now she knows.'

'She says it will ruin your career.'

'Did she? We'll talk about that presently. We have had a nasty scene in the House with the Irishmen, and I'm famished. Go and change, there's a dear. Dinner's just coming in.'

Kitty went reluctantly. She came down in a white flowing garment, with a small green wreath in her hair, which, together with the air of storm which still enwrapped her, made her more Mænad-like than ever. Ashe took no notice, gave her a laughing account of what had passed in the House, and ate his dinner.

Afterwards, when they were alone, and he was just about to return to the House, she made a swift rush across the dining-room, and caught his coat with both hands.

'William, I can't go to that dinner—it would kill me!'

'How you repeat yourself, darling!' he said with a smile. 'I suppose you'll give Lady Parham decent

notice. What'll you do? Get a doctor's certificate and go away?'

Kitty panted. 'Not at all. I shall not tell her till an hour before.'

Ashe whistled.

'War?—I see. Open war. Very well. Then we shall get to Venice for Easter.'

Kitty fell back.

'What do you mean.'

'Very plain, isn't it? But what does it matter? Venice will be delightful, and there are plenty of good men to take my place.'

'Lord Parham would pass you over?'

'Not at all. But I can't work in public with a man whom I must cut in private. It wouldn't amuse me. So if you're decided, Kitty,—write to Danieli's for rooms.'

He lit his cigarette, and went out with perfect nonchalance and good temper.

Kitty was to have gone to a ball. She countermanded her maid's preparations, and sent the maid to bed. In due time all the servants went to bed, the front door being left on the latch as usual for Ashe's late return. About midnight a little figure slipt into the child's nursery. The nurse was fast asleep. Kitty sat beside the child, motionless, for an hour, and when Ashe let himself into the house about two o'clock, he heard a little rustle in the hall, and there stood Kitty, waiting for him.

'Kitty, what are you about?' he said in pretended amazement. But in reality he was not astonished at all. His life for months past had been pitched in a key of extravagance and tumult. He had been practically certain that he should find Kitty in the hall.

With great tenderness he half led, half carried her upstairs. She clung to him as passionately as, before

dinner, she had repulsed him. When they reached their room, the tired man, dropping with sleep, after a parliamentary wrestle in which every faculty had been taxed to the utmost, took his wife in his arms; and there Kitty sobbed and talked herself into a peace of complete exhaustion. In this state she was one of the most exquisite of human beings, with words, tone, and gestures of a heavenly softness and languor. The evil spirit went out of her, and she was all ethereal tenderness, sadness, and remorse. For more than two years, scenes like this had, in Ashe's case, melted into final delight and intoxication which more than effaced the memory of what had gone before. Now for several months he had dreaded the issue of the crisis, no less than the crisis itself. It left him unnerved as though some morbid scirocco had passed over him.

When Kitty at last had fallen asleep, Ashe stood for some time beside his dressing-room window, looking absently into the cloudy night, too tired even to undress. A gusty north-west wind tore down the street and beat against the windows. The unrest without increased the tension of his mind and body. Like Lady Tranmore, he had as it were stepped back from his life, and was looking at it,—the last three years of it in particular—as a whole. What was the net result of those years? Where was he?—Whither were he and Kitty going? A strange pang shot through him. The mere asking of the question had been as the lifting of the lamp of Psyche.

The scene that night in the House of Commons had been for him a scene of conflict; in the main, also, of victory. His virile powers, capacities, and ambitions had been at their height. He had felt the full spell of the English political life, with all its hard fighting joy, the exhilaration which flows from the vastness of the interests

on which it turns, and the intricate appeal it makes, in the case of a man like himself, to a hundred inherited aptitudes, tastes, and traditions.

And here he stood in the darkness, wondering whether indeed the best of his life were not over,—the prey of forebodings as strong and vagrant as the gusts outside.

Birds of the night! He forced himself to bed, and slept heavily. When he woke up, the May sun was shining into his room. Kitty in the freshest of morning dresses was sitting on his bed like a perching bird, waiting impatiently till his eyes should open, and she could ask him his opinion on her dress for the ball. The savour and joy of life returned upon him in a flood. Kitty was the prettiest thing ever seen; he had scored off those Tory fellows the night before; the Parhams' dinner was all right; and life was once more kind, manageable, and full of the most agreeable possibilities. A certain indolent impatience in him recoiled from the mere recollection of the night before. The worry was over; why think of it again?

CHAPTER VIII

MEANWHILE Lady Tranmore had reached home, and after one of those pathetic hours in her husband's room which made the secret and sacred foundation of her daily life, she expected Mary Lyster, who was to dine at Tranmore House before the two ladies presented themselves at a musical party given by the French Ambassadress. Before her guest's arrival, Lady Tranmore wandered about her rooms, unable to rest, unable even to read the evening papers on Ashe's speech, so possessed was she still by her altercation with Kitty, and by the foreboding sense of what it meant. William's future was threatened; and the mother whose whole proud heart had been thrown for years into every successful effort and every upward step of her son, was up in arms.

Mary Lyster arrived to the minute. She came in, a tall gliding woman, her hair falling in rippled waves on either side of her face,—which in its ample comeliness and placidity reminded the Italianate Lady Tranmore of many faces well known to her in early Siennese or Florentine art. Mary's dress to-night was of a noble red, and the glossy brown of her hair made a harmony both with her dress and with the whiteness of her neck that contented the fastidious eye of her companion. 'Polly' was now thirty, in the prime of her good looks. Lady Tranmore's affection for her, which had at one time even included the notion that she might possibly

become William Ashe's wife, did not at all interfere with a shrewd understanding of her limitations. But she was daughterless herself; her family feeling was strong; and Mary's society was an old and pleasant habit one could ill have parted with. In her company, moreover, Mary was at her best.

Elizabeth Tranmore never discussed her daughter-in-law with her cousin. Loyalty to William forbade it, no less than a strong sense of family dignity. For Mary had spoken once,—immediately after the engagement,—with energy, nay, with passion; prophesying woe and calamity. Thenceforward it was tacitly agreed between them that all root-and-branch criticism of Kitty and her ways was taboo. Mary was, indeed, on apparently good terms with her cousin's wife. She dined occasionally at the Ashes', and she and Kitty met frequently under the wing of Lady Tranmore. There was no cordiality between them, and Kitty was often sharply or sulkily certain that Mary was to be counted among those hostile forces, with which, in some of her moods, the world seemed to her to bristle. But if Mary kept in truth a very sharp tongue for many of her intimates on the subject of Kitty, Lady Tranmore at least was determined to know nothing about it.

On this particular evening, however, Lady Tranmore's self-control failed her, for the first time in three years. She had not talked five minutes with her guest before she perceived that Mary's mind was in truth brimfull of gossip,—the gossip of many drawing-rooms, as to Kitty's escapade with the Prince, Kitty's relations to Lady Parham, Kitty's parties, and Kitty's whims. The temptation was too great; her own guard broke down.

'I hear Kitty is furious with the Parhams,' said Mary, as the two ladies sat together after their rapid dinner. It was a rainy night, and the fire to which they had drawn up was welcome.

Lady Tranmore shook her head sadly.

'I don't know where it is to end,' she said, slowly.

'Lady Parham told me yesterday—you don't mind my repeating it?'—Mary looked up with a smile,—'she was still dreadfully afraid that Kitty would play her some trick about next Friday. She knows that Kitty detests her.'

'Oh no,'—said Lady Tranmore in a vague voice—'Kitty couldn't!—impossible!'

Mary turned an observant eye upon her companion's conscious and troubled air, and drew conclusions not far from the truth.

'And it's all so awkward, isn't it?'—she said, with sympathy,—'when apparently Lady Parham is as much Prime Minister as he is!'

For in those days certain great houses and political ladies, though not at the zenith of their power, were still, in their comparative decline, very much to be reckoned with. When Lady Parham talked longer than usual with the French Ambassador, his Austrian and German colleagues wrote anxious despatches to their Governments; when a special mission to the East of great importance had to be arranged, nobody imagined that Lord Parham had very much to do with the appointment of the Commissioner,—who happened to have just engaged himself to Lady Parham's second girl. No young member on the Government side, if he wanted office, neglected Lady Parham's invitations, and admission to her more intimate dinners was still almost as much coveted as similar favours had been a generation before in the case of Lady Jersey, or still earlier, in that of Lady Holland. She was a small old woman, with a shrewish face, a waxen complexion and a brown wig. In spite of short sight, she saw things that escaped most other people; her tongue was rarely at a loss; she was on the whole a

good friend, though never an unreflecting one; and what she forgave might be safely reckoned as not worth resenting.

Elizabeth Tranmore received Mary's remark with reluctant consent. Lady Parham—from the English aristocratic standpoint—was not well-born. She had been the daughter of a fashionable music-master, whose blood was certainly not Christian. And there were many people beside Lady Tranmore who resented her domination.

'It will be so perfectly easy when the moment comes to invent some excuse or other, for shelving William's claims,' sighed Ashe's mother. 'Nobody is indispensable, and if that old woman is provoked,—she will be capable of any mischief.'

'What do you want for William?' said Mary smiling.

'He ought of course to have the Home Office!' replied Lady Tranmore, with fire.

Mary vowed that he would certainly have it. 'Kitty is so clever, she will understand how important discretion is,—before things go too far.'

Lady Tranmore made no answer. She gazed into the fire, and Miss Lyster thought her depressed.

'Has William ever interfered?'—she asked, cautiously.

Lady Tranmore hesitated.

'Not that I know of,' she said at last. 'Nor will he ever,—in the sense in which any ordinary husband would interfere.'

'I know! It is as though he had a kind of superstition about it. Isn't there a fairy story, in which an elf marries a mortal on condition that if he ever ill-treats her, her people will fetch her back to Fairyland? One day the husband lost his temper and spoke crossly; instantly there was a crash of thunder and the elf-wife vanished.'

'I don't remember the story. But it's like that,—exactly. He said to me once that he would never have asked her to marry him if he had not been able to make up his mind to let her have her own way—never to coerce her.'

But having said this, Lady Tranmore repented. It seemed to her she had been betraying William's affairs. She drew her chair back from the fire, and rang to ask if the carriage had arrived. Mary took the hint. She arrayed herself in her cloak, and chatted agreeably about other things till the moment for their departure came.

As they drove through the streets, Lady Tranmore stole a glance at her companion.

'She is really very handsome,' she thought,—'much better-looking than she was at twenty. What are the men about, not to marry her?'

It was indeed a puzzle. For Mary was increasingly agreeable as the years went on, and had now quite a position of her own in London, as a charming woman without angles or apparent egotisms; one of the initiated besides, whom any dinner party might be glad to capture. Her relations, near and distant, held so many of the points of vantage in English public life, that her word inevitably carried weight. She talked politics, as women of her class must talk them to hold their own; she supported the Church; and she was elegantly charitable, in that popular sense which means that you subscribe to your friends' charities, without setting up any of your own. She was rich also,—already in possession of a considerable fortune, inherited from her mother, and prospective heiress of at least as much again from her father, old Sir Richard Lyster, whose house in Somersetshire she managed to perfection. In the season she stayed with various friends, or with Lady Tranmore,

Sir Richard being now infirm, and preferring the country. There was a younger sister, who was known to have married imprudently, and against her father's wishes, some five or six years before this. Catharine was poor, the wife of a clergyman with young children. Lady Tranmore sometimes wondered whether Mary was quite as good to her as she might be. She herself sent Catharine various presents in the course of the year for the children.

—Yes, it was certainly surprising that Mary had not married. Lady Tranmore's thoughts were running on this tack, when of a sudden her eyes were caught by the placard of one of the evening papers.

'Interview with Mr. Cliffe. Peace assured.'—So ran one of the lines.

'Geoffrey Cliffe home again!' Lady Tranmore's tone betrayed a shade of contemptuous amusement. 'We shall have to get on without our daily telegram. Poor London!'

If at that moment it had occurred to her to look at her companion, she would have seen a quick reddening of Mary's cheeks.

'He has had a great success though, with his telegrams!' replied Miss Lyster. 'I should have thought one couldn't deny that.'

'Success! Only with the people who don't matter,' said Lady Tranmore with a shrug. 'Of what importance is it to anybody that Geoffrey Cliffe should telegraph his doings and his opinions every morning to the English public?'

We were in the midst of a disagreement with America. A whirlwind was unloosed, and as it happened Geoffrey Cliffe was riding it. For that gentleman had not succeeded in the designs which were occupying his mind when he had first made Kitty's acquaintance, in the Grosvilles' country house. He had desired an appoint-

ment in Egypt; but it had not been given him, and after some angry restlessness at home, he had once more taken up a pilgrim's staff, and departed on fresh travels, bound this time for the Pamirs and Thibet. After nearly three years, during which he had never ceased, through the newspapers and periodicals, to keep his opinions and his personality before the public, he had been heard of in China, and as returning home by America. He arrived at San Francisco just as the dispute had broken out, was at once captured by an English paper, and sent to New York, with *carte blanche*. He had risen with alacrity to the situation. Thenceforward for some three weeks, England found a marvellous series of large-print telegrams, signed 'Geoffrey Cliffe,' awaiting her each morning on her breakfast table.

'"The President and I met this morning"—"The President considers, and I agree with him"—"I told the President"—&c.—"The President this morning signed and sealed a memorable despatch. He said to me afterwards"'—&c.

Two diverse effects seemed to have been produced by these proceedings. A certain section of Radical opinion, which likes to see affairs managed *sans cérémonie*, and does not understand what the world wants with diplomatists when journalists are to be had, applauded; the old-fashioned laughed.

It was said that Cliffe was going into the House immediately; the young bloods of the party in power enjoyed the prospect, and had already stored up the *ego et Rex meus* details of his correspondence, for future use.

'How could a man make such a fool of himself!' continued Lady Tranmore, the malice in her voice expressing not only the old aristocratic dislike of the press, but also the jealousy natural to the mother of an official son.

'Well, we shall see,' said Mary, after a pause. 'I don't

quite agree with you, Cousin Elizabeth—indeed I know there are many people who think that he has certainly done good.'

Lady Tranmore turned in astonishment. She had expected Mary's assent to her original remark as a matter of course. Mary's old flirtation with Geoffrey Cliffe, and the long breach between them which had followed it, were things well known to her. They had coincided, moreover, with her own dropping of the man whom for various reasons she had come to regard as unscrupulous and unsafe.

'Good!' she echoed,—'*good*?—with that boasting, and that *fanfaronnade*. Polly!'

But Miss Lyster held her ground.

'We must allow everybody their own ways of doing things, mustn't we? I am quite sure he has meant well—all through.'

Lady Tranmore shrugged her shoulders. 'Lord Parham told me he had had the most grotesque letters from him!—and meant henceforward to put them in the fire.'

'Very foolish of Lord Parham,' said Mary promptly. 'I should have thought that a Prime Minister would welcome information—from all sides. And of course Mr. Cliffe thinks that the Government has been *very* badly served.'

Lady Tranmore's wonder broke out. 'You don't mean—that—you hear from him?'

She turned and looked full at her companion. Mary's colour was still raised, but otherwise she betrayed no embarrassment.

'Yes, dear Cousin Elizabeth,—I have heard from him regularly for the last six months. I have often wished to tell you; but I was afraid you might misunderstand me, and—my courage failed me!' The speaker, smiling, laid her hand on Lady Tranmore's. 'The fact is he wrote to

me last autumn from Japan. You remember that poor cousin of mine who died at Tokio? Mr. Cliffe had seen something of him and he very kindly wrote both to his mother and me afterwards. Then——'

'You didn't forgive him!—' cried Lady Tranmore.

Mary laughed.

'Was there anything to forgive? We were both young and foolish. Anyway he interests me,—and his letters are splendid.'

'Did you ever tell William you were corresponding with him?'

'No, indeed! But I want very much to make them understand each other better. Why shouldn't the Government make use of him? He doesn't wish at all to be thrown into the arms of the other side. But they treat him so badly'——

'My dear Mary! are we governed by the proper people, or are we not?'

'It is no good ignoring the press,' said Mary, holding herself gracefully erect. 'And the Bishop quite agrees with me.'

Lady Tranmore sank back in her seat.

'You discussed it with the Bishop?' It was now some time since Mary had last brought the family Bishop,—her cousin, and Lady Tranmore's—to bear upon an argument between them. But Elizabeth knew that his appearance in the conversation invariably meant a *fait accompli*, of some sort.

'I read him some of Mr. Cliffe's letters,' said Mary, modestly. 'He thought them most remarkable.'

'Even when he mocks at missionaries?'

'Oh! but he doesn't mock at them any more! He has learnt wisdom,—I assure you he has!'

Lady Tranmore's patience almost departed, Mary's look was so penetrated with indulgence for the prejudices

of a dear but unreasonable relation. But she managed to preserve it.

'And you knew he was coming home?'

'Oh yes!' said Mary. 'I meant to have told you at dinner. But something put it out of my head,—Kitty, of course! I shouldn't wonder if he were at the Embassy to-night.'

'Polly!—tell me!'—Lady Tranmore gripped Miss Lyster's hand with some force,—'are you going to marry him?'

'Not that I know of,' was the smiling reply. 'Don't you think I'm old enough by now to have a man friend?'

'And you expect me to be civil to him!'

'Well dear Cousin Elizabeth—you know—you never did break with him quite,'——

Lady Tranmore, in her bewilderment, reflected that she had certainly meant to complete the process whenever she and Mr. Cliffe should meet again. Aloud she could only say, rather stiffly—

'I can't forget that William disapproves of him strongly.'

'Oh no—excuse me—I don't think he does!' said Mary, quickly. 'He said to me the other day, that he should be very glad to pick his brains when he came home. And then he laughed and said he was a "deuced clever fellow,"—excuse the adjective!—and it was a great thing to be "as free as that chap was"—"without all sorts of boring colleagues and responsibilities." Wasn't it like William?'

Lady Tranmore sighed.

'William shouldn't say those things.'

'Of course, dear, he was only in fun. But I'll lay you a small wager, Cousin Elizabeth, that Kitty will ask Mr. Cliffe to lunch, as soon as she knows he is in town.'

Lady Tranmore turned away.

'I dare say. No one can answer for what Kitty will do. But Geoffrey Cliffe has said scandalous things of William.'

'He won't say them again,' said Mary soothingly. 'Besides, William never minds being abused, a bit,—does he?'

'He should mind,' said Lady Tranmore drawing herself up. 'In my young days, our enemies were our enemies and our friends our friends. Nowadays nothing seems to matter. You may call a man a scoundrel one day, and ask him to dinner the next. We seem to use words in a new sense—and I confess I don't like the change. Well, Mary, I sha'n't of course be rude to any friend of yours. But don't expect me to be effusive. And please remember that my acquaintance with Geoffrey Cliffe is older than yours.'

Mary made a caressing reply, and gave her mind for the rest of the drive to the smoothing of Lady Tranmore's ruffled plumes. But it was not easy. As that lady made her way up the crowded staircase of the French Embassy, her fine face was still absent and a little stern.

Mary could only reflect that she had at least got through a first explanation which was bound to be made. Then for a few minutes her mind surrendered itself wholly to the question 'Will he be here?'

The rooms of the French Embassy were already crowded. An ambassador, short, stout, and somewhat morose, his plain features and snub nose emerging with difficulty from his thick fair hair, superabundant beard and moustache,—with an elegant and smiling ambassadress, personifying amid the English crowd that Paris from which through every fibre she felt herself a pining exile,—received the guests. The scene was ablaze with uniforms, for the Speaker had been giving a dinner, and Royalty was

expected. But as Lady Tranmore perceived at once, very few members of the House of Commons were present. A hot debate on some detail of the Naval Estimates had been sprung on Ministers, and the Whips on each side had been peremptorily keeping their forces in hand.

'I don't see either William or Kitty,' said Mary, after a careful scrutiny not in truth directed to the discovery of the Ashes.

'No. I suppose William was kept, and Kitty did not care to come alone.'

Mary said nothing. But she was well aware that Kitty was never restrained from going into society by the mere absence of her husband. Meanwhile Lady Tranmore was lost in secret anxieties as to what might have happened in Hill Street. Had there been a quarrel? Something certainly had gone wrong, or Kitty would be here—

'Lady Kitty not arrived?' said a voice like a macaw's, beside her.

Elizabeth turned and shook hands with Lady Parham. That extraordinary woman, followed everywhere by the attentive observation of the crowd, had never asserted herself more sharply in dress, manner, and coiffure, than on this particular evening,—so it seemed, at least to Lady Tranmore. Her ample figure was robed in the white satin of a bride, her wrinkled neck disappeared under a weight of jewels, and her bright chestnut wig, to which the diamond tiara was fastened, positively attacked the spectator, so patent was it and unashamed. Unashamed too were the bold tyrannous eyes, the rouge-spots on either cheek, the strength of the jaw, the close-shut ability of the mouth. Elizabeth Tranmore looked at her with a secret passion of dislike. Her English pride of race, no less than the prejudices of her taste and training, could

hardly endure the fact that, for William's sake, she must make herself agreeable to Lady Parham.

Agreeable, however, she tried to be. Kitty had seemed to her tired in the afternoon, and had no doubt gone to bed,—so she averred.

Lady Parham laughed.

'Well, she mustn't be tired the night of my party next week,—or the skies will fall. I never took so much trouble before about anything in my life.'

'No,—she must take care,' said Lady Tranmore. 'Unfortunately she is not strong, and she does too much.'

Lady Parham threw her a sharp look.

'Not strong? I should have thought Lady Kitty was made on wires. Well—if she fails me, I shall go to bed—with smallpox. There will be nothing else to be done. The Princess has actually put off another engagement to come,—she has heard so much of Lady Kitty's reciting. But you'll help me through, won't you?'

And the wrinkled face and harsh lips fell into a contortion meant for a confidential smile; while through it all, the eyes, wholly independent, studied the face beside her,—closely, suspiciously,—until the owner of it in her discomfort could almost have repeated aloud the words that were ringing in her mind—'I shall *not* go to Lady Parham's! My note will reach her on the stroke of eight.'

'Certainly,—I will keep an eye on her!' she said lightly. 'But you know—since her illness——'

'Oh no!'—said Lady Parham impatiently, 'she is very well—very well indeed. I never saw her look so radiant. By the way, did you hear your son's speech the other night? I did not see you in the gallery? A great pity if you missed it. It was admirable.'

Lady Tranmore replied regretfully that she had not been there, and that she had not been able to have a word with him about it since.

'Oh! he knows he did well,' said Lady Parham carelessly. 'They all do. Lord Parham was delighted. He could do nothing but talk about it at dinner. He says they were in a very tight place, and Mr. Ashe got them out.'

Lady Tranmore expressed her gratification with all the dignity she could command, conscious meanwhile that her companion was not listening to a word, absorbed as she was in a hawk-like examination of the room through a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses.

Suddenly the eye-glasses fell with a rattle.

'Good heavens!' cried Lady Parham. 'Do you see who that is talking to Mr. Loraine?'

Lady Tranmore looked, and at once perceived Geoffrey Cliffe in close conversation with the leader of the Opposition. The lady beside her gave an angry laugh.

'If Mr. Cliffe thinks he has done himself any good by these ridiculous telegrams of his, he will find himself mistaken!—People are perfectly furious about them.'

'Naturally,' said Lady Tranmore. 'Only that it is a pity to take him seriously.'

'Oh! I don't know. He has his following; unfortunately, some of our own men are inclined to think that Parham should conciliate him. Ignore him, I say. Behave as though he didn't exist!'—'Ah! by the way,'—the speaker raised herself on tip-toe, and said in an audacious undertone,—'Is it true that he may possibly marry your cousin Miss Lyster?'

Lady Tranmore kept a smiling composure. 'Is it true—that Lord Parham may possibly give him an appointment?'

Lady Parham turned away in annoyance. 'Is that one of the inventions going about?'

'There are so many,' said Lady Tranmore.

At that moment, however, to her infinite relief, her

companion abruptly deserted her. She was free to observe the two distant figures in conversation,—Geoffrey Cliffe and Mr. Loraine, the latter, a man now verging on old age, white-haired and wrinkled, but breathing still through every feature and every movement the scarcely diminished energy of his magnificent prime. He stood with bent head, listening attentively, but, as Lady Tranmore thought, coldly to the arguments that Cliffe was pouring out upon him. Once he looked up in a sudden recoil, and there was a flash from an eye famous for its power of majestic or passionate rebuke. Cliffe, however, took no notice, and talked on, Loraine still listening.

'Look at them!' said Lady Parham venomously, in the ear of one of her intimates. 'We shall have all this out in the House to-morrow. The Opposition mean to play that man for all he's worth.—Mr. Loraine too!—with his puritanical ways. I know what he thinks of Cliffe! He wouldn't *touch* him in private. But in public—you'll see—he'll swallow him whole—just to annoy Parham. There's your politician!'

And stiff with the angry virtue of the 'ins,' denouncing the faction of the 'outs,' Lady Parham passed on.

Elizabeth Tranmore meanwhile turned to look for Mary Lyster. She found her close behind, engaged in a perfunctory conversation, which evidently left her quite free to follow things more exciting. She too was watching; and presently it seemed to Lady Tranmore that her eyes met with those of Cliffe. Cliffe paused; abruptly lost the thread of his conversation with Mr. Loraine, and began to make his way through the crowded room. Lady Tranmore watched his progress with some attention. It was the progress, clearly, of a man much in the eye and mouth of the public. Whether the atmosphere surrounding him in these rooms was more hostile, or more favourable, Lady Tranmore could not be quite sure.

Certainly the women smiled upon him; and his strange face, thinner, browner, more weather-beaten and life-beaten than ever, under its crest of grizzling hair, had the old arrogant and picturesque power, but, as it seemed to her, with something added,—something subtler, was it, more romantic than of yore?—which arrested the spectator. Had he really been in love with that French woman? Lady Tranmore had heard it rumoured that she was dead.

It was not towards Mary Lyster, primarily, that he was moving, Elizabeth soon discovered; it was towards herself. She braced herself for the encounter.

The greeting was soon over. After she herself had said the appropriate things, Lady Tranmore had time to notice that Mary Lyster, whose turn came next, did not attempt to say them. She looked indeed unusually handsome and animated; Lady Tranmore was certain that Cliffe had noticed as much, at his first sight of her. But the remarks she omitted showed how minute and recent was their knowledge of each other's movements. Cliffe himself gave a first impression of high spirits. He declared that London was more agreeable than he had ever known it, and that after his three years' absence, nobody looked a day older. Then he inquired after Ashe.

Lady Tranmore replied that William was well, but hard-worked; she hoped to persuade him to get a few days abroad at Whitsuntide. Her manner was quiet, without a trace of either discourtesy or effusion. Cliffe began to twist his moustache, a sign she knew well. It meant that he was in truth both irritable and nervous.

'You think they'll last till Whitsuntide?'

'The Government?' she said smiling. 'Certainly—and beyond.'

'I give them three weeks,' said Cliffe, twisting anew, with a vigour that gave her a positive physical sympathy with the tortured moustache. 'There will be some papers out to-morrow that will be a bomb-shell.'

'About America? Oh! they have been blown up so often. You for instance have been doing your best,—for months!'

His perfunctory laugh answered the mockery of her charming eyes.

'Well—I wish I could make William hear reason.'

Lady Tranmore held herself stiffly. The Christian name seemed to her an offence. It was true that in old days he and Cliffe had been on those terms. Now,—it was a piece of bad taste.

'Probably what is reason to you is folly to him,' she said dryly.

'No, no!—he *knows*,' said Cliffe with impatience. 'The others don't. Parham is more impossible—more crassly, grossly ignorant!' He lifted hands and eyes in protest. 'But Ashe of course is another matter altogether.'

'Well, go and see him—go and talk to him!' said Lady Tranmore, still mocking. 'There are no lions in the way.'

'None,' said Cliffe. 'As a matter of fact, Lady Kitty has asked me to luncheon. But does one find Ashe himself in the middle of the day?'

At the mention of her daughter-in-law Elizabeth made an involuntary movement. Mary standing beside her turned towards her and smiled.

'Not often.' The tone was cold. 'But you could always find him at the House.' And Lady Tranmore moved away.

'Is there a quiet corner anywhere?' said Cliffe to Mary. 'I have such heaps to tell you.'

So while some Polish gentleman in the main drawing-room, whose name ended in *ski*, challenged his violin to the impossible, Cliffe and Mary retired from observation into a small room thrown open with the rest of the suite, which was in truth the morning-room of the ambassadress.

As soon as they found themselves alone, there was a pause in their conversation; each involuntarily looked at the other. Mary certainly recognised that these years of absence had wrought a noticeable change in the man before her. He had aged. Hard living and hard travelling had left their marks. But, like Lady Tranmore, she also perceived another difference. The eyes bent upon her were indeed as before the eyes of a man self-centred, self-absorbed. There was no chivalrous softness in them, no consideration. The man who owned them, used them entirely for his own purposes; they betrayed none of that changing instinctive relation towards the human being—any human being—within their range, which makes the charm of so many faces. But they were sadder, more sombre, more restless; they thrilled her more than they had already thrilled her once, in the first moment of her youth.

What was he going to say? From the moment of his first letter to her from Japan, Mary had perfectly understood that he had some fresh purpose in his mind. She was not anxious, however, to precipitate the moment of explanation. She was no longer the young girl whose equilibrium is upset by the mere approach of the man who interests her. Moreover, there was a past between herself and Cliffe, the memory of which might indeed point her to caution. Did he now after all want to marry her?—because she was rich, and he was comparatively poor, and could only secure an English career at the cost of a well-stored wife? Well,—all that should be

thought over; by herself no less than by him. Meanwhile her vanity glowed within her, as she thus held him there, alone,—to the discomfiture of other women more beautiful, and more highly placed than herself; as she remembered his letters in her desk at home; and the secrets she imagined him to have told her. Then again she felt a rush of sudden disquiet, caused by this new aspect,—wavering and remote—as though some hidden grief emerged and vanished. He had the haggard air of a man who scarcely sleeps. All that she had ever heard of the French affair rushed through her mind, stirring there an angry curiosity.

These impressions took, however, but a few minutes, while they exchanged some conventionalities. Then Cliffe said, scrutinising the face and form beside him with that intentness, which, from him was more generally taken as compliment than offence—

'Will you excuse the remark? there are no women who keep their first freshness like Englishwomen!'

'Thank you! If we feel fresh, I suppose we look it. As for you—you clearly want a rest!'

'No time to think of it then; I have come home to fight—all I know; to make myself as odious as possible.'

Mary laughed.

'You have been doing that so long, Why not try the opposite?'

Cliffe looked at her sharply.

'You think I have made a failure of it?'

'Not at all! You have made everybody furiously uncomfortable—and you see how civil even the Radical papers are to you.'

'Yes. What fools!' said Cliffe shortly. 'They'll soon leave that off. Just now I'm a stick to beat the Government with. But you don't believe I shall carry my point?'

The point concerned a particular detail in a pending negotiation with the United States. Cliffe had been denouncing the Government for what he conceived to be their coming retreat before American demands. America, according to him, had been playing the bully; and English interests were being betrayed.

Mary considered.

'I think you will have to change your tactics.'

'Dictate them then!'

He bent forward, with that sudden change of manner, that courteous sweetness of tone and gesture, which few women could resist. Mary's heart, seasoned though it were, felt a charming flutter. She talked, and she talked well. She had no independence of mind, and very little real knowledge; but she had an excellent reporter's ability; she knew what to remember, and how to tell it. Cliffe listened to her attentively, acknowledging to himself the while that she had certainly gained. She was a far more definite personality than she had been when he last knew her; and her self-possession, her trained manner rested him. Thank heaven, she was not a clever woman!—how he detested the breed. But she was a useful one. And the smiling common-place into which she fell so often, was positively welcome to him. He had known what it was to court a woman who was more than his equal both in mind and passion; and it had left him bitter and broken.

'Well, all this is most illuminating,' he said at last. 'I owe you immense thanks.' And he put out a pair of hands, thin, brown, and weather-stained as his face, and pressed one of hers. 'We're very old friends,—aren't we?'

'Are we?' said Mary, drawing back.

'So far as any one can be the friend of a chap like me,' he said hastily. 'Tell me—are you with Lady Tranmore?'

'No. I go to her in a few days—till I leave London.'

'Don't go away'—he said, suddenly and insistently,—'don't go away!'

Mary could not help a slight wavering in the eyes that perforce met his. Then he said abruptly—as she rose—

'By the way—they tell me Ashe is a great man.'

She caught the note of incredulous contempt in his voice and laughed.

'They say he'll be in the Cabinet directly.'

'And Lady Kitty, I understand, is a scandal to gods and men,—and the most fashionable person in town?'

'Oh, not now,' said Mary. 'That was last year.'

'You mean people are tired of her?'

'Well, after a time, you know, a naughty child——'

'Becomes a bore. Is she a bore?—I doubt,—I very much doubt.'

'Go and see,' said Mary. 'When do you lunch there?'

'I think to-morrow. Shall I find you?'

'Oh no. I am not at all intimate with Lady Kitty.'

Cliffe's slight smile, as he followed her into the large drawing-room, died under his moustache. He divined at once the relation between the two, or thought he did.

As for Mary, she caught her last sight of Cliffe, standing bareheaded on the steps of the Embassy, his lean distinction, his ugly good-looks marking him out from the men around him. Then, as they drove away she was glad that the darkness hid her from Lady Tranmore. For suddenly she could not smile. She was filled with the perception that if Geoffrey Cliffe did not now ask her to marry him, life would utterly lose its savour,—its carefully cherished and augmented savour, and youth would abandon her. At the same time she realised that she would have to make a fight of it,—with every weapon she could muster.

CHAPTER IX

'WASN'T I expected?' said Darrell, with a chilly smile.

'Oh yes sir—yes sir!' said the Ashes' butler, as he looked distractedly round the drawing room. 'I believe her ladyship will be in directly. Will you kindly take a seat?'

The man's air of resignation convinced Darrell that Lady Kitty had probably gone out without any orders to her servants, and had now forgotten all about her luncheon party,—a state of things to which the Hill Street household was no doubt well accustomed.

'I shall claim some lunch,' he thought to himself, 'whatever happens. These young people want keeping in their place. Ah!

For he had observed, placed on a small easel, the print of Madame de Longueville in costume, and he put up his eye-glass to look at it. He guessed at once that its appearance there was connected with the Fancy Ball which was now filling London with its fame, and he examined it with some closeness. 'Lady Kitty will make a stir in it—no doubt of that!'—he said to himself, as he turned away. 'She has the keenest *flair* of them all for what produces an effect. None of the others can touch her—Mrs. Alcot—none of them!'

He was thinking of the other members of a certain group, at that time well known in London society—a group characterised chiefly by the beauty, extravagance,

and audacity of the women belonging to it. It was by no means a group of mere fashionables. It contained a large amount of ability and accomplishment; some men of aristocratic family, who were also men of high character, with great futures before them; some persons from the literary or artistic worlds, who possessed besides their literary or artistic gifts, a certain art of agreeable living, and some few others,—especially young girls—admitted generally for some peculiar quality of beauty or manner, outside the ordinary canons. Money was really presupposed by the group as a group. The life they belonged to was a life of the rich, the houses they met in were rich houses. But money as such had no power whatever to buy admission to their ranks; and the members of the group were at least as impatient of the claims of mere wealth as they were of those of mere virtue.

On the whole the group was an element of ferment and growth in the society that had produced it. Its impatience of convention and restraint, the exaltation of intellectual or artistic power which prevailed in it, and even the angry opposition excited by its pretensions and its exclusiveness, were all perhaps rather profitable than harmful at that moment of our social history. Old customs were much shaken; the new were shaping themselves, and this daring coterie of young and brilliant people, living in each other's houses, calling each other by their Christian names, setting a number of social rules at defiance, discussing books, making the fame of artists, and—now and then—influencing politics, were certainly helping to bring the new world to birth. Their foes called them 'The Archangels,' and they themselves had accepted the name with complacency.

Kitty of course was an Archangel, so was Mrs. Alcot; Cliffe had belonged to them before his travels began;

Louis Harman was more or less of their tribe; and Lady Tranmore, though not herself an Archangel, entertained the set in London and in the country. Like various older women connected with the group, she was not of them, but she 'harboured' them.

Darrell was well aware that he did not belong to them, though personally he was acquainted with almost all the members of the group. He was not completely indifferent to his exclusion; and this fact annoyed him more than the exclusion itself.

He had scarcely finished his inspection of the print when the door again opened and Geoffrey Cliffe entered. Darrell had not yet seen him since his return and since his attack on the Government had made him the hero of the hour. Of the newspaper success Darrell was no less jealous and contemptuous than Lady Tranmore,—though for quite other reasons. But he knew better than she the intellectual quality of the man, and his disdain for the journalist was tempered by his considerable though reluctant respect for the man of letters.

They greeted each other coolly, while Cliffe, not seeing his hostess, looked round him with annoyance.

'Well—we shall probably entertain each other,' said Darrell, as they sat down,—'Lady Kitty often forgets her engagements.'

'Does she?' said Cliffe, coldly, pretending to glance through a book beside him. It touched his vanity that his hostess was not present, and still more that Darrell should suppose him a person to be forgot'en. Darrell, however, who had no mind for any discomfort that might be avoided, made a few dexterous advances; Cliffe's brow relaxed, and they were soon in conversation.

The position of the Ministry naturally presented itself as a topic. Two or three retirements were impending; the whole position was precarious. Would the Cabinet

be reconstructed without a dissolution, or must there be an appeal to the country?

Cliffe was passionately in favour of the latter course. The party fortunes could not possibly be retrieved without a general shuffling of the cards, and an opportunity for some wholly fresh combination involving new blood.

'In any case,' said Cliffe—'I suppose our friend here is sure of one or other of the big posts?'

'William Ashe? Oh! I suppose so,—unless some intrigue gets in the way.' Darrell dropped his voice.—'Parham doesn't in truth hit it off with him very well. Ashe is too clever, and Parham doesn't understand his paradoxes.'

'Also I gather,'—said Cliffe with a smile, 'that Lady Parham has her say?'

Darrell shrugged his shoulders.

'It sounds incredible that one should still have to reckon with that kind of thing at this time of day. But I dare say it's true.'

'However, I imagine Lady Kitty—by the way, how much longer shall we give her?'—Cliffe looked at his watch with a frown:—'may be trusted to take care of that.'

Darrell merely raised his eyebrows, without replying.

'What, not a match for one Lady Parham?' said Cliffe with a laugh. 'I should have thought—from my old recollections of her—she would have been a match for twenty?'

'Oh!—if she cared to try.'

'She is not ambitious?'

'Certainly;—but not always for the same thing.'

'She is trying to run too many horses abreast?'

'Oh! I am not a great friend,'—said Darrell smiling,—'I should never dream of analysing Lady Kitty. Ah!'—he turned his head—'are we not forgotten, or just remembered?—which?'

For a rapid step approached; the door opened and a lady appeared on the threshold. It was not Kitty, however. The new comer advanced, putting up a pair of fashionable eye-glasses, and looking at the two men in a kind of languid perplexity, intended, as Darrell immediately said to himself, merely to prolong the moment and the effect of her entry. Mrs. Alcot was very tall, and inordinately thin. Her dark head on its slim throat, the poetic lines of the brow, her half-shut eyes, the gleam of her white teeth, and all the delicate detail of her dress, and, one might even say, of her manner, gave an impression of beauty, though she was not in truth beautiful. But she had grace and she had daring—the two essential qualities of an Archangel; she was also a remarkable artist, and no small critic.

'Mr. Cliffe!' she said, with a start of what was evidently agreeable surprise—'Kitty never told me. When did you come?'

'I arrived a few days ago. Why weren't you at the Embassy last night?'

'Because I was much better employed. I have given up crushes. But I would have come—to meet you. Ah! Mr. Darrell!'—she added, in another tone, holding out an indifferent hand,—'where is Kitty?' She looked round her.

'Shall we order lunch?' said Darrell, who had given her a greeting as careless as her own.

'Kitty is really too bad, she is never less than an hour late,' said Mrs. Alcot, seating herself. 'Last time she dined with us, I asked her for 7.30. She thought something very special must be happening, and arrived—breathless—at half-past eight. Then she was furious with me because she was not the last. But one can't do it twice. Well'—addressing herself to Cliffe—'are you come home to stay?'

'That depends,' said Cliffe—'on whether England makes itself agreeable to me.'

'What are your deserts? Why should England be agreeable to you?' she replied with a smiling sharpness. 'You do nothing but croak about England.'

Thus challenged, Cliffe sat down beside her and they fell into a bantering conversation. Darrell, though inwardly wounded by the small trouble they took to include him, let nothing appear, put in a word now and then, or turned over the pages of the illustrated books.

After five minutes a fresh guest arrived. In walked the little Dean, Dr. Winston, who had originally made acquaintance with Lady Kitty at Grosville Park. He came in overflowing with spirits and enthusiasm. He had been spending the morning in Westminster Abbey with another Dean more famous, though not more charming than himself, and with yet another congenial spirit, one of the younger historians,—all of them passionate lovers of the rich human detail of the past, the actual men and women, kings, queens, bishops, executioners, and all the shreds and tatters that remained of them. Together, they had opened a royal tomb, and the Dean's eyes were sparkling as though the ghost of the Queen whose ashes he had been handling still walked and talked with him.

He passed in his light disinterested way through most sections of English society, though the slave of none; and he greeted Darrell and Mrs. Alcot as acquaintances. Mrs. Alcot introduced Cliffe to him, and the small Dean bowed rather stiffly. He was a supporter of the Government, and he thought Cliffe's campaign against them vulgar and unfair.

'Is there no hope of Lady Kitty?' he said to Mrs. Ascot.

'Not much. Shall we go down to lunch?'

'Without our hostess?' The Dean opened his eyes.

'Oh! Kitty expects it,' said Mrs. Alcot with affected resignation—'and the servants are quite prepared. Kitty asks everybody to lunch—then somebody asks her—and she forgets. It's quite simple.'

'Quite,' said Cliffe, buttoning up his coat,—'But I think I shall go to the club.'

He was looking for his hat, when again there was a commotion on the stairs—a high voice giving orders—and in burst Kitty. She stood still as soon as she saw her guests, talking so fast and pouring out such a flood of excuses that no one could get in a word. Then she flew to each guest in turn, taking them by both hands,—Darrell only excepted,—and showing herself so penitent, amusing and charming that everybody was propitiated. It was Fanchette of course,—Fanchette the criminal, the incomparable. Her dress for the ball!—Kitty raised eyes and hands to heaven—it would be a marvel, a miracle! Unless indeed she were lying cold and quiet in her little grave before the time came to wear it. But Fanchette's tempers—Fanchette's caprices!—no! Kitty began to mimic the great dressmaker torn to pieces by the crowd of fashionable ladies,—stopping abruptly in the middle to say to Cliffe——

'You were going away?—I saw you take up your hat.'

'I despaired of my hostess,' said Cliffe with a smile. Then as he perceived that Mrs. Alcot had taken up the theme and was holding the others in play, he added in a lower voice, 'and I was in no mood for second-best.'

Kitty's eyes twinkled a moment as she turned them on Madeleine Alcot.

'Ah! I remember—at Grosville Park—what a bad temper you had. You would have gone away furious.'

'With disappointment—yes,' said Cliffe, as he looked at her with an admiration he scarcely endeavoured to conceal. Kitty was in black, but a large hat of white

tulle, in the most extravagant fashion of the day made a frame for her hair and eyes, and increased the general lightness and fantasy of her appearance. Cliffe tried to recall her as he had first seen her at Grosville Park, but his recollection of the young girl could not hold its own against the brilliant and emphatic reality before him.

At luncheon it chafed him that he must divide her with the Dean. Yet she was charming with the old man, who chatted history, art, and Paris to her, with a delightful innocence and ignorance of all that made Lady Kitty Ashe the talk of the town, and an old-fashioned deference besides, that insensibly curbed her manner and her phrases as she answered him. Yet when the Dean left her free she returned to Cliffe, as though in some sort they two had really been talking all the time, through all the apparent conversation with other people.

'I have read all your telegrams,' she said. 'Why did you attack William so fiercely?'

Cliffe was taken by surprise, but he felt no embarrassment,—her tone was not that of the wife in arms.

'I attacked the official—not the man. William knows that.'

'He is coming in to-day if possible—He wanted to see you.'

'Good news! William knows that he would have hit just as hard in my place.'

'I don't think he would,' said Kitty calmly. 'He is so generous.'

The colour rushed to Cliffe's face.

'Well scored! I wish I had a wife to play these strokes for me. I shall argue that a keen politician has no right to be generous. He is at war.'

Kitty took no notice. She leant her little chin on her hand, and her eyes perused the face of her companion.

'Where have you been—all the time—before America?'

'In the deserts—fighting devils,' said Cliffe, after a moment.

'What does that mean?' she asked, wondering.

'Read my new book. That will tell you about the deserts.'

'And the devils?'

'Ah!—I keep them to myself.'

'Do you?' she said softly. 'I have just read your poems over again.'

Cliffe gave a slight start, then looked indifferent.

'Have you? But they were written three years ago. Dieu merci, one finds new devils like new acquaintances.'

She shook her head.

'What do you mean?' he asked her, half amused, half arrested.

'They are always the old,' she said in a low voice. Their eyes met. In hers was the same veiled restless melancholy as in his own. Together with the dazzling air of youth that surrounded her, the cherished, flattered, luxurious existence that she and her house suggested, they made a strange impression upon him. 'Does she mean me to understand that she is not happy?' he thought to himself. But, the next moment, she was engaged in a merry chatter with the Dean, and all trace of the mood she had thus momentarily shown him had vanished.

Half way through the luncheon, Ashe came in. He appeared, fresh and smiling, irreproachably dressed, and showing no trace whatever of the hard morning of official work he had just passed through, nor of the many embarrassments which, as everyone knew, were weighing on the Foreign Office. The Dean, with his keen sense for the dramatic, watched the meeting between him and

Cliffe with some closeness, having in mind the almost personal duel between the two men—a duel of letters, telegrams, or speeches, which had been lately carried on in the sight of Europe and America. For Ashe now represented the Foreign Office in the House of Commons, and had been much badgered by the Tory extremists who followed Cliffe.

Naturally, being Englishmen, they met as though nothing had happened, and they had parted the day before in Pall Mall. A 'Hullo, Ashe!' and 'Hullo, Cliffe!—glad to see you back again,' completed the matter. The Dean enjoyed it as a specimen of English 'phlegm,' recalling with amusement his last visit to the Paris of the second Empire,—Paris torn between Government and Opposition, the salons of the one divided from the salons of the other by a sulphurous gulf, unless when some Lazarus of the moment, some well-known novelist or poet, cradled in the Abraham's bosom of Liberalism, passed amid shrieks of triumph or howls of treason into the official Inferno.

Not that there was any avoiding of topics in this English case. Ashe had no sooner slipped into his seat than he began to banter Cliffe upon a letter of a supporter which had appeared in that morning's 'Times.' It was written by Lord S.—who had played the part of public 'fool' for half a generation. To be praised by him was disaster, and Cliffe's flush showed at once that the letter had caused him acute annoyance. He and Ashe fell upon the writer, vying with each other in anecdotes that left him presently close-plucked and bare.

'That's all very well,' said Kitty, amid the laughter which greeted the last tale, 'but he never told *you* how he proposed to the second Lady S.——'

And lifting a red strawberry, which she held poised against her red laughing lips, she waited a moment—

looking round her. 'Go on, Kitty!'—said Ashe, approvingly—'go on.'

Thus permitted, Kitty gave one of the little 'scenes,' arranged from some experience of her own, which were very famous amongst her intimates. Ashe called them her 'parlour tricks,' and was never tired of making her exhibit them. And now, just as at Grosville Park, she held her audience. She spoke without a halt, her small features answering perfectly to every impulse of her talent, each touch of character or dialogue as telling as a malicious sense of comedy could make it; arms, hands, shoulders all aiding in the final result—a table swept by a very storm of laughter, in the midst of which Kitty quietly finished her strawberry.

'Well done, Kitty!' Ashe, who sat opposite to her, stretched his hand across, and patted hers.

'Does she love him?' Cliffe asked himself, and could not make up his mind, closely as he tried to observe their relations. He was more and more conscious of the exciting effect she produced on himself, doubly so indeed because of that sudden stroke of melancholy wherewith—like a Rembrandt shadow—she had thrown into relief the gaiety and frivolity of her ordinary mood.

The stimulus, whatever it was, played upon his vanity. He too sought an opening and found it. Soon it was he who was monopolising the conversation, with an account of two days spent with Bismarck in a Prussian country house,—during the triumphant days of the winter which followed on Sadowa. The story was brilliantly told, and of some political importance. But it was disfigured by arrogance and affectation, and Ashe's eyes began to dance a little. Cliffe meanwhile could not forget that he was in the presence of a rival and an official, could not refrain after a while from a note of challenge here and there. The conversation diverged from the tale into matters of

current foreign politics. Ashe, lounging and smoking, at first knew nothing, had heard of nothing, as usual. Then a comment or correction dropped out; Cliffe repeated himself vehemently—only to provoke another. Presently, no one knew how, the two men were measured against each other *corps à corps*,—the wide knowledge and trained experience of the minister, against the originality, the force, the fantastic imagination of the writer.

The Dean watched it with delight. He was very fond of Ashe, and liked to see him getting the better of 'the newspaper fellow.' Kitty's lovely brown eyes travelled from one to the other. Now it seemed to the Dean that she was proud of Ashe, now that she sympathised with Cliffe. Soon, however, like the god at Philippi, she swept upon the poet and bore him from the field.

'Not a word more politics!' she said peremptorily to Ashe, holding up her hand. '*I* want to talk to Mr. Cliffe about the ball.'

Cliffe was not very ready to obey. He had an angry sense of having been somehow shown to disadvantage, and would like to have challenged his host again. But Kitty poured balm into his wounds. She drew him apart a little, using the play of her beautiful eyes for him only, and talking to him in a new voice of deference.

'You're going, of course? Lady M—— told me the other day she *must* have you!'

Cliffe, still a little morose, replied that his invitation had been waiting for him at his London rooms. He gave the information carelessly, as though it did not matter to him a straw. In reality as soon as, while still in America, he had seen the announcement of the ball in one of the New York papers, he had written at once to the Marchioness who was to give it,—an old acquaintance of his,—practically demanding an invitation. It had been sent indeed with alacrity, and without waiting for its arrival Cliffe

had ordered his dress in Paris. Kitty inquired what it was to be.

'I told my man to copy a portrait of Alva.'

'Ah, that's right,'—said Kitty, nodding, 'that's right. Only it would have been better if it had been Torquemada.'

Rather nettled, Cliffe asked what there might be about him that so forcibly suggested the Grand Inquisitor. Kitty, cigarette in hand, with half-shut eyes, did not answer immediately. She seemed to be perusing his face —with difficulty.

'Strength, I suppose,——' she said at last, slowly. Cliffe waited, then burst into a laugh.

'And cruelty?' She nodded.

'Who are my victims?'

She said nothing.

'Whose tales have you been listening to, Lady Kitty?'

She mentioned the name of a French lady. Cliffe changed countenance.

'Ah, well, if you have been talking to her,—' he said haughtily, 'you may well expect to see me appear as Diabolus in person.'

'No.—But it's since then—that I've read the poems again. You see you tell the public so much——'

'That you think you have the right to guess the rest?' He paused, then added with impatience—'don't guess, Lady Kitty! You have everything that life can give you. Let my secrets alone.'

There was silence. Kitty looking round her saw that Madeleine Alcot was entertaining her other guests, and that she and Cliffe were unobserved. Suddenly Cliffe bent towards her, and said with roughness, his face struggling to conceal the feeling behind it—

'You heard—and you believed—that I tormented her —that I killed her?'

The anguish in his eyes seemed to strike a certain answering fire from Kitty's.

'Yes,—but——'

'But what?'

'I didn't think it very strange——'

Cliffe watched her closely.

'—That a man should be—an inhuman beast—if he were jealous—and desperate? You can sympathise with these things?'

She drew a long breath, and threw away the cigarette she had been holding suspended in her small fingers.

'I don't know anything about them.'

'Because,—' he hesitated,—'your own life has been so happy?'

She evaded him. 'Don't you think that jealousy will soon be as dead as—saying your prayers and going to church? I never meet anybody that cares enough—to be jealous.'

She spoke first with passionate force, then with contempt, glancing across the room at Madeleine Alcot. Cliffe saw the look, and remembered that Mrs. Alcot's husband, a distinguished Treasury official, had been for years the intimate friend of a very noble and beautiful woman, herself unhappily married. There was no scandal in the matter, though much talk. Mrs. Alcot meanwhile had her own affairs; her husband and she were apparently on friendly terms; only neither ever spoke of the other; and their relations remained a mystery.

Cliffe bent over to Kitty.

'And yet you said you could understand?—such things didn't seem strange to you.'

She gave a little reckless laugh.

'Did I? It's like the people who think they could act or sing,—if they only had the chance. I choose to think I could feel. And of course I couldn't. We've lost

the power. All the old, horrible, splendid things are dead and done with.'

'The old passions, you mean?'

'And the old poems! *You'll* never write like that again!'

'God forbid!' said Cliffe under his breath. Then as Kitty rose he followed her with his eyes. 'Lady Kitty, you've thrown me a challenge that you hardly understand!—Some day I must answer it.'

'Don't answer it,' said Kitty hastily.

'Yes,—if I can drag the words out,' he said sombrely. She met his look in a kind of fascination, excited by the memory of the story which had been told her, by her own audacity in speaking of it, by the presence of the dead passion she divined, lying shrouded and ghastly in the mind of the man beside her. Even the ugly things of which he was accused, did but add to the interest of his personality for a nature like hers, greedy of experience, and discontented with the real.

While he on his side was flattered and astonished by her attitude towards him. As Ashe's wife, she would surely dislike and try to trample on him. That was what he had expected.

'I hear you are an Archangel, Lady Kitty,' said the Dean, who having obstinately outstayed all the other guests had now settled his small person and his thin legs into a chair beside his hostess with a view to five agreeable minutes. He was the most harmless of social epicures was the Dean, and he felt that Lady Kitty had defrauded him at lunch,—in favour of that great, ruffling, Byronic fellow Cliffe, who ought to have better taste than to come lunching with the Ashes.

'Am I?' said Kitty, who had thrown herself into the corner of a sofa, and sat curled up there in an attitude

which the Dean thought charming, though it would not —he was aware—have become Mrs. Winston.

'Well, you know best,' said the Dean. 'But at any rate be good and explain to me what is an Archangel.'

'Somebody whom most men and all women dislike,' said Kitty promptly.

'Yet they seem to be numerous,' remarked the Dean.

'Not at all!' cried Kitty, with an air of offence,—'not at all! If they were numerous they would of course be popular.'

'And in fact they are rare—and detested? What other characteristics have they?'

'Courage,' said Kitty, looking up.

'Courage to break rules? I hear they all call each other by their Christian names,—and live in each other's rooms,—and borrow each other's money—and despise conventionalities. I am sorry you are an Archangel, Lady Kitty!'

'I didn't admit that I was,' said Kitty, 'but if I am—why are you sorry?'

'Because,' said the Dean smiling, 'I thought you were too clever to despise conventionalities.'

Kitty sat up with revived energy, and joined battle. She flew into a tirade as to the dulness and routine of English life, the stupidity of good people, and the tyranny of English hypocrisy. The Dean listened with amusement, then with a shade of something else. At last he got up to go.

'Well, you know, we have heard all that before. My point of view is so much more interesting—subtle—romantic! Anybody can attack Mrs. Grundy, but only a person of originality can adore her. Try it, Lady Kitty! It would be really worth your while.'

Kitty mocked and exclaimed.

'Do you know what that phrase—that name of

abomination—always recalls to me?' pursued the old man.

'It bores me, even to guess,' was Kitty's petulant reply.

'Does it? I think of some of the noblest people I have ever known,—brave men—beautiful women—who fought Mrs. Grundy—and perished!'

The Dean stood looking down upon her, with an eager, sensitive expression. Tales that he had heeded very little when he had first heard them ran through his mind; he had thought Lady Kitty's intimate *tête-à-tête* with her husband's assailant in the press, disagreeable and unseemly; and as for Mrs. Alcot, he had disliked her particularly.

Kitty looked up unquelled.

> '"Tis better to have fought and lost—
> Than never to have fought at all—'

she quoted, with one of her most radiant and provoking smiles.

'Incorrigible!' cried the Dean, catching up his hat. 'I see!—once an Archangel—always an Archangel.'

'Oh no!' said Kitty. 'There may be "war in heaven."'

'Well, don't take Mrs. Alcot for a leader, that's all,' said the Dean, as he held out a hand of farewell.

'And now I understand!' cried Kitty triumphantly. 'You detest my best friend!'

The Dean laughed, protested, and went. Ashe, who had been writing letters while Kitty and the Dean were talking, escorted the old man to the door.

When he returned, he found Kitty sitting with her hands in her lap, lost apparently in thought.

'Darling!' he said, looking at his watch—'I must be off directly—but I should like to see the boy.'

Kitty started. She rang, and the child was brought

down. He sat on Kitty's knee, and Ashe, coming to the sofa, threw an arm round them both.

'You are not a bad-looking pair,' he said, kissing first Kitty, and then the baby. 'But he's rather pale, Kitty. I think he wants the country.'

Kitty said nothing, but she lifted the little white embroidered frock, and looked at the twisted foot. Then Ashe felt her shudder.

'Dear, don't be morbid!' he cried, resentfully. 'He will have so much brains that nobody will remember that. Think of Byron!'

Kitty did not seem to have heard.

'I remember so well when I first saw his foot,—after your mother told me,—and they brought him to me,'—she said slowly. 'It seemed to me it was the end——'

'The end of what?'

'Of my dream.'

'What *do* you mean, Kitty!'

'Do you remember the masque in the "Tempest"? First Iris, with saffron wings, and rich Ceres, and great Juno'—

She half closed her eyes—

'Then the nymphs and the reapers—dancing together on "the short-grassed green,"—the sweetest, gayest show'—

She breathed the words out softly. 'Then, suddenly——'

She sat up stiffly and struck her small hands together:—

'Prospero starts and speaks. And in a moment—without warning—with "a strange, hollow, and confused noise"'—she dragged the words drearily,—'*they heavily vanish.* That —she pointed shuddering to the child's foot—'was for me the sign of Prospero.'

Ashe looked at her with anxiety, finding it indeed impossible to laugh at her.

She was very pale, her breath came with difficulty, and she trembled from head to foot. He tried to draw her into his arms, but she held him away.

'That first year, I had been so happy,' she continued in the same voice. 'Everything was so perfect, so glorious. Life was like a great pageant, in a palace. All the old terrors went. I often had fears as a child—fears I couldn't put into words, but that overshadowed me. Then when I saw Alice—the shadow came nearer. But that was all gone. I thought God was reconciled to me, and would always be kind to me now. And then I saw that foot,—and I knew that He hated me still. He had burnt His mark into my baby's flesh. And I was never to be quite happy again,—but always in fear, fear of pain—and death—and grief.—'

She paused. Her large eyes gazed into vacancy, and her whole slight frame showed the working of some mysterious and pitiful distress.

A wave of poignant alarm swept through Ashe's mind, coupled also with a curious sense of something foreseen. He had never witnessed precisely this mood in her before; but now that it was thus revealed, he was suddenly aware that something like it had been for long moving obscurely below the surface of her life. He took the child, and laid him on the floor, where he rolled at ease, cooing to himself. Then he came back to Kitty, and soothed her with extraordinary tenderness and skill. Presently she looked at him, as though some obscure trouble of which she had been the victim had released her, and she were herself again.

'Don't go away just yet,' she said in a voice which was still low and shaken. He came close to her, again put his arms round her, and held her on his breast in silence.

'That is heavenly!' he heard her say to herself after a while, in a whisper.

'Kitty!' His eyes grew dim, and he stooped to kiss her.

'Heavenly'— she went on, still as though following out her own thought rather than speaking to him, 'because one *yields—yields*! Life is such tension—always.'

She closed her eyes quickly, and he watched the beautiful lashes lying still upon her cheek. With an emotion he could not explain,—for it was not an emotion of the senses, just as her yielding had not been a yielding of the senses but a yielding of the soul,—he continued to hold her in his arms, her life, her will given to him wholly, sighed out upon his heart.

Then gradually she recovered her balance; the normal Kitty came back. She put out her hand, and touched his face.

'You must go back to the House, William.'

'Yes, if you are all right.'

She sat up, and began to rearrange some of her hair that had slipped down.

'You have carried us both into such heights and depths, darling!' said Ashe after he had watched her a little in silence, 'that I have forgotten to tell you the gossip I brought back from mother this morning.'

Kitty paused, interrogatively. She was still pale.

'Do you know that mother is convinced Mary Lyster has made up her mind to marry Cliffe?'

There was a pause, then Kitty said with incredulous contempt: 'He would never *dream* of marrying her!'

'Not so sure! She has a great deal of money, and Cliffe wants money badly.'

Ashe began to put his papers together. Kitty questioned him a little more, intermittently, as to what his mother had said. When he had left her, she sat for long on the sofa, playing with some flowers she had taken from her dress, or sombrely watching the child, as it lay on the floor beside her.

CHAPTER X

'My lady! It's come!'

The maid put her head in just to convey the good news. Kitty was in her bedroom walking up and down in a fury which was now almost speechless.

The housemaid was waiting on the stairs. The butler was waiting in the hall. Till that hurried knock was heard at the front door, and the much-tried Wilson had rushed to open it, the house had been wrapped in a sort of storm silence. It was ten o'clock on the night of the ball. Half Kitty's costume lay spread out upon her bed. The other half—although, since seven o'clock, all Kitty's servants had been employed in rushing to Fanchette's establishment in New Bond Street, at half-hour intervals, in the fastest hansoms to be found,—had not yet appeared.

However, here at last was the end of despair. A panting boy dragged the box into the hall, the butler and footman carried it upstairs and into their mistress's room, where Kitty in a white peignoir stood waiting, with the brow of Medea.

'The boy that brought it looked just fit to drop, my lady!' said the maid, as she undid the box. She was a zealous servant, but she was glad sometimes to chasten these great ones of the land, by insisting on the seamy side of their pleasures.

Kitty paused in the eager task of superintendence, and

turned to the under-housemaid who stood by, gazing open-mouthed at the splendours emerging from the box.

'Run down and tell Wilson to give him some wine and cake!' she said peremptorily. 'It's all Fanchette's fault—odious creature!—running it to the last like this—after all her promises!'

The housemaid went, and soon sped back. For no boy on earth would she have been long defrauded of the sight of her ladyship's completed gown.

'Did Wilson feed him?' Kitty flung her the question as she bent, alternately frowning and jubilant, over the creation before her.

'Yes, my lady. It was quite a little fellow. He said his legs were just run off his feet,' said the girl growing confused as the moon-robe unfolded.

'Poor wretch!' said Kitty, carelessly. 'I'm glad I'm not an errand——Blanche!—you know, Fanchette may be an old demon, but she *has* got taste! Just look at these folds, and the way she's put on the pearls! Now then—make haste!'

Off flew the peignoir, and, with the help of the excited maids, Kitty slipt into her dress. Ten times over did she declare that it was hopeless, that it didn't fit in the least, that it wasn't one bit what she had ordered, that she couldn't and wouldn't go out in it, that it was simply scandalous, and Fanchette should never be paid a penny. Her maids understood her, and simply went on, pulling, patting, fastening, as quickly as their skilled fingers could work, till the last fold fell into its place, and the under-housemaid stepped back with clasped hands and an 'Oh! my lady!' couched in a note of irrepressible ecstasy.

'Well?' said Kitty, still frowning—'eh, Blanche?—'

The maid proper would have scorned to show emotion;

but she nodded approval. 'If you ask me, my lady, I think you have never looked so well in anything.'

Kitty's brow relaxed at last, as she stood gazing at the reflection in the large glass before her. She saw herself as Artemis—à la Madame de Longueville—in a hunting dress of white silk, descending to the ankles, embroidered from top to toe in crescents of seed pearls and silver, and held at the waist by a silver girdle. Her throat was covered with magnificent pearls, a Tranmore family possession, lent by Lady Tranmore for the occasion. The slim ankles and feet were cased in white silk, cross-gartered with silver and shod with silver sandals. Her belt held her quiver of white-winged arrows; her bow of ivory inlaid with silver was slung at her shoulder, while across her breast, the only note of colour in the general harmony of white, fell a scarf of apple-green holding the horn, also of ivory and silver, which, like the belt and bow, had been designed for her in Madame de Longueville's Paris.

But neither she nor her model would have been finally content with an adornment so delicately fanciful and minute. Both Kitty and the goddess of the Fronde knew that they must hold their own in a crowd. For this there must be diamonds. The sleeves therefore on the white arms fell back from diamond clasps; the ivory spear in her right hand was topped by a small genius with glittering wings; and in the masses of her fair hair, bound with pearl fillets, shone the large diamond crescent that Lady Tranmore had foreseen, with one small attendant star at either side.

'Well, upon my word, Kitty!' said a voice from her husband's dressing-room.

Kitty turned impetuously.

'Do you like it?' she cried. Ashe approached. She lifted her horn to her mouth and stood tip-toe. The

THE FINISHING TOUCHES

movement was enchanting; it had in it the youth and freshness of spring woods; it suggested mountain distances and the solitudes of high valleys. Intoxication spoke in Ashe's pulses; he wished the maids had been far away that he might have taken the goddess in his very human arms. Instead of which he stood lazily smiling.

'What Endymion are you calling?' he asked her. 'Kitty, you are a dream!'

Kitty pirouetted, then suddenly stopped short and held out a foot.

'Look at those silk things, sir. Nobody but Fanchette could have made them look anything but a botch. But they spoil the dress. And all to please mother and Mrs. Grundy!'

'I like them. I suppose—the nearest you could get to buskins? You would have preferred ankles *au naturel*? I don't think you'd have been admitted, Kitty.'

'Shouldn't I! And so few people have feet they can show!' sighed Kitty regretfully.

Ashe's eyes met those of the maid, who was trying to hide her smiles, and he and she both laughed.

'What do you think about it, eh, Blanche?'

'I think her ladyship is much better as she is,' said the maid decidedly. 'She'd have felt very strange when she got there.'

Kitty turned upon her like a whirlwind. 'Go to bed!' she said, putting both hands on the shoulders of the maid—'Go to bed at once! Esther can give me my cloak. Do you know, William, she was awake all last night thinking of her brother——'

'The brother who has had an operation? But I thought there was good news?' said Ashe kindly.

'He's much better,' put in Kitty. 'She heard this afternoon. She won't be such a goose as to lie awake, I

should hope, to-night. Don't let me catch you here when I get back!' she said, releasing the girl, whose eyes had filled with tears. 'Mr. Ashe will help me, and if he pulls the strings into knots, I shall just cut them—so there! Go away, get your supper, and go to bed. Such a life as I've led them all to-day!' She threw up her hands in a perfunctory penitence.

The maid was forced to go, and the housemaid also returned to the hall with Kitty's opera-cloak and fan, till it should please her mistress to descend. Both of them were dead tired, but they took a genuine disinterested pleasure in Kitty's beauty and her fine frocks. She was not by any means always considerate of them; but still, with that wonderful generosity that the poor show every day to the rich, they liked her; and to Ashe every servant in the house was devoted.

Kitty meanwhile had driven Ashe to his own toilette, and was walking about the room, now studying herself in the glass, and now chattering to him through the open door.

'Have you heard anything more about Tuesday?' she asked him presently.

'Oh yes!—compliments by the dozen. Old Parham overtook me as I was walking away from the House, and said all manner of civil things.'

'And I met Lady Parham in Marshall's,' said Kitty. 'She does thank so badly!—I should like to show her how to do it. Dear me!' Kitty sighed. 'Am I henceforth to live and die on Lady Parham's ample breast?'

She sat with one foot beating the floor, deep in meditation.

'And shall I tell you what mother said?' shouted Ashe through the door.

'Yes.'

He repeated—so far as dressing would let him—a

number of the charming and considered phrases in which Lady Tranmore full of relief, pleasure, and a secret self-reproach had expressed to him the effect produced upon herself and a select public by Kitty's performance at the Parhams'. Kitty had indeed behaved like an angel, —an angel *en toilette de bal*, reciting a scene from Alfred de Musset. Such politeness to Lady Parham, such smiles, sometimes a shade malicious, for the Prime Minister, who on his side did his best to efface all memory of his speech of the week before from the mind of his fascinating guest; smiles from the Princess, applause from the audience; an evening, in fact, all froth and sweetstuff, from which Lady Parham emerged grimly content, conscious at the same time that she was henceforward very decidedly, and rather disagreeably, in the Ashes' debt; while Elizabeth Tranmore went home in a tremor of delight, happily persuaded that Ashe's path was now clear.

Kitty listened, sometimes pleased, sometimes inclined to be critical or scornful of her mother-in-law's praise. But she did love Lady Tranmore, and on the whole she smiled. Smiles indeed had been Kitty's portion since that evening of strange emotion, when she had found herself sobbing in William's arms for reasons quite beyond her own defining. It was as if, like the Prince in the fairy tale, some iron band round her heart had given way. She seemed to dance through the house; she devoured her child with kisses: and she was even willing sometimes to let William tell her what his mother suspected of the progress of Mary's affair with Geoffrey Cliffe, though she carefully avoided speaking directly to Lady Tranmore about it. As to Cliffe himself, she seemed to have dropped him out of her thoughts. She never mentioned him, and Ashe could only suppose she had found him disenchanting.

'Well, darling! I hope I have made a sufficient fool of myself to please you!'

Ashe had thrown the door wide, and stood on the threshold, arrayed in the brocade and fur of a Venetian noble. He was a somewhat magnificent apparition, and Kitty, who had coaxed or driven him into the dress, gave a scream of delight. She saw him before her own glass, and the crimson senator made eyes at the white goddess as they posed triumphantly together.

'You're a very rococo sort of goddess, you know, Kitty!' said Ashe. 'Not much Greek about you!'

'Quite as much as I want, thank you,' said Kitty, curtseying to her own reflection in the glass. 'Fanchette could have taught them a thing or two! Now come along! Ah!—wait!——'

And, gathering up her possessions, she left the room. Ashe, following her, saw that she was going to the nursery, a large room on the back staircase. At the threshold she turned back and put her finger to her lip. Then she slipped in, reappearing a moment afterwards to say in a whisper, 'Nurse is not in bed. You may come in.' Nurse indeed knew much better than to be in bed. She had been sitting up to see her ladyship's splendours, and she rose smiling as Ashe entered the room.

'A parcel of idiots, nurse, aren't we?' he said, as he too displayed himself, and then he followed Kitty to the child's beside. She bent over the baby, removed a corner of the cot-blanket that might tease his cheek, touched the mottled hand softly, removed a light that seemed to her too near—and still stood looking.

'We must go, Kitty.'

'I wish he were a little older,' she said, discontentedly, under her breath, 'that he might wake up and see us both! I should like him to remember me like this.'

'Queen and huntress, come away!' said Ashe, drawing her by the hand.

Outside the landing was dimly lighted. The servants were all waiting in the hall below.

'Kitty!' said Ashe passionately. 'Give me one kiss. You're so sweet to-night—so sweet!'

She turned.

'Take care of my dress!' she smiled, and then she held out her face under its sparkling crescent, held it with a dainty deliberation, and let her lips cling to his.

Ashe and Kitty were soon wedged into one of the interminable lines of carriages that blocked all the approaches to St. James's Square. The ball had been long expected, and there was a crowd in the streets, kept back by the police. The brougham went at a foot's pace, and there was ample time either for reverie or conversation. Kitty looked out incessantly, exclaiming when she caught sight of a costume or an acquaintance. Ashe had time to think over the latest phase of the negotiations with America, and to go over in his mind the sentences of a letter he had addressed to the 'Times' in answer to one of great violence from Geoffrey Cliffe. His own letter had appeared that morning. Ashe was proud of it. He made bold to think that it exposed Cliffe's exaggerations and insincerities neatly, and perhaps decisively. At any rate he hummed a cheerful tune as he thought of it.

Then suddenly and incongruously a recollection occurred to him.

'Kitty! do you know that I had a letter from your mother, this morning?'

'Had you?' said Kitty, turning to him with reluctance. 'I suppose she wanted some money.'

'She did. She says she is very hard up. If I cared to use it, I have an easy reply.'

'What do you mean?'

'I might say, d——n it, we are too!'

Kitty laughed uneasily.

'Don't begin to talk money matters now, William, *please.*'

'No, dear, I won't. But we shall really have to draw in.'

'You *will* pay so many debts!' said Kitty frowning.

Ashe went into a fit of laughter.

'That's my extravagance, isn't it? I assure you I go on the most approved principles. I divide our available money among the greatest number of hungry claimants it will stretch to. But after all it goes a beggarly short way.'

'I know mother will think my diamond crescent a horrible extravagance,' said Kitty, pouting. 'But you are the only son, William, and we must behave like other people.'

'Dear, don't trouble your little head,' he said, 'I'll manage it somehow.'

Indeed, he knew very well that he could never bring his own indolent and easy-going temper in such matters to face any real struggle with Kitty over money. He must go to his mother, who now—his father being a hopeless invalid—managed the estates with his own and the agent's help. It was, of course, right that she should preach to Kitty a little; but she would be sensible and help them out. After all, there was plenty of money. Why shouldn't Kitty spend it?

Any one who knew him well might have observed a curious contrast between his private laxity in these matters and the strictness of his public practice. He was scruple and delicacy itself in all financial matters that touched his public life—directorships, investments, and the like, no less than in all that concerned interest and

patronage. He would have been a bold man who had dared to propose to William Ashe any expedient whatever by which his public place might serve his private gain. His proud and fastidious integrity, indeed, was one of the sources of his growing power. But as to private debts—and the tradesmen to whom they were owed!—his standards were still essentially those of the Whigs from whom he descended, of Fox, the all-indebted, or of Melbourne, who has left an amusing disquisition on the art of dividing a few loaves and fishes in the shape of banknotes among a multitude of creditors.

Not that affairs were as yet very bad. Far from it. But there was little to spare for Madame d'Estrées—who ought indeed to want nothing; and Ashe was vaguely meditating his reply to that lady, when a face in a carriage near them, which was trying to enter the line, caught his attention.

'Mary!' he said, 'à la Sir Joshua—and mother. They don't see us. Query, will Cliffe take the leap to-night? Mother reports a decided increase of ardour on his part. Sorry you don't approve of it, darling!'

'It's just like lighting a lamp to put it out—that's all!' said Kitty with vivacity. 'The man who marries Mary is done for.'

'Not at all. Mary's money will give him the pedestal he wants, and trust Cliffe to take care of his own individuality afterwards! Now if you'll transfer your alarms to *Mary*, I'm with you!'

'Oh! of *course* he'll be unkind to her. She may lay her account for that. But it's the *marrying* her!' And Kitty's upper lip curled under a slow disdain.

William laughed out.

'Kitty, really!—you remind me, please, of Miss Jane Taylor—

"I did not think there could be found—a little heart so hard!"

Mary is thirty; she would like to be married. And why not? She'll give quite as good as she gets.'

'Well, she won't get—anything. Geoffrey Cliffe thinks of no one but himself.'

Ashe's eyebrows went up.

'Oh, well, all men are selfish,—and the women don't mind.'

'It depends on how it's done,' said Kitty.

Ashe declared that Cliffe was just an ordinary person, 'l'homme sensuel moyen,'—with a touch of genius. Except for that, no better and no worse than other people. What then?—the world was not made up of persons of enormous virtue like Lord Althorp and Mr. Gladstone. If Mary wanted him for a husband, and could capture him, both in his opinion would have pretty nearly got their deserts.

Kitty, however, fell into a reverie, after which she let him see a face of the same startling sweetness as she had several times shown him of late.

'Do you want me to be nice to her?' She nestled up to him.

'Bind her to your chariot wheels, madam! You can!' said Ashe, slipping a hand round hers.

Kitty pondered.

'Well, then, I won't tell her that I *know* he's still in love with the French woman. But it's on the tip of my tongue.

'Heavens!' cried Ashe—'The Vicomtesse D——, the lady of the poems? But she's dead! I thought that was over long ago.'

Kitty was silent for a moment, then said with low-voiced emphasis:

'That anyone could write those poems, and then *think* of Mary!'

Yes—the poems were fine,' said Ashe—'but make-believe!'

Kitty protested indignantly. Ashe bantered her a little on being one of the women who were the making of Cliffe.

'Say what you like!' she said, drawing a quick breath. 'But, often and often, he says divine things—divinely! I feel them there!' And she lifted both hands to her breast with an impulsive gesture.

'Goddess!' said Ashe, kissing her hand because enthusiasm became her so well. 'And to think that I should have dared to roast the divine one in a "Times" letter this morning!'

The hall and staircase of Yorkshire House were already filled with a motley and magnificent crowd when Ashe and Kitty arrived. Kitty, still shrouded in her cloak, pushed her way through, exchanging greetings with friends, shrieking a little now and then for the safety of her bow and quiver, her face flushed with pleasure and excitement. Then she disappeared into the cloak-room, and Ashe was left to wonder how he was going to endure his robes through the heat of the evening, and to exchange a laughing remark or two with the Parliamentary Secretary to the Admiralty, into whose company he had fallen.

'What are we doing it for?' he asked the young man, whose thin person was well set off by a Tudor dress.

'Oh! don't be superior!' said the other. 'I'm going to enjoy myself like a school-boy!'

And that indeed seemed to be the attitude of most of the people present. And not only of the younger members of the dazzling company. What struck Ashe particularly, as he mingled with the crowd, was the

alacrity of the elder men. Here was a famous lawyer already nearing the seventies, in the Lord Chancellor's garb of a great ancestor; here an ex-Viceroy of Ireland with a son in the Government, magnificent in an Elizabethan dress, his fair bushy hair and reddish beard shining above a doublet on which glittered a jewel given to the founder of his house by Elizabeth's own hand; next to him, a white-haired judge in the robes of Judge Gascoyne; a peer, no younger, at his side, in the red and blue of Mazarin: and showing each and all in their gay complacent looks a clear revival of that former masculine delight in splendid clothes which came so strangely to an end with that older world on the ruins of which Napoleon rose. So with the elder women. For this night they were young again. They had been free to choose from all the ages a dress that suited them; and the result of this renewal of a long relinquished eagerness, had been in many cases to call back a bygone self, and the tones and gestures of those years when beauty is its own chief care.

As for the young men, the young women, and the girls, the zest and pleasure of the show shone in their eyes and movements, and spread through the hall, and up the crowded staircase, like a warm contagious atmosphere. At all times, indeed, and in all countries an aristocracy has been capable of this sheer delight in its own splendour, wealth, good looks, and accumulated treasure; whether in the Venice that Petrarch visited; or in the Rome of the Renaissance Popes; in the Versailles of the Grand Monarque; or in the Florence of to-day, which still at moments of *festa* reproduces in its midst all the costumes of the Cinquecento.

In this English case there was less dignity than there would have been in a Latin country, and more personal

beauty; less grace perhaps, and yet a something richer and more romantic.

At the top of the stairs stood a Marquis in a dress of the Italian Renaissance, a Gonzaga who had sat for Titian; beside him a fair-haired wife in the white satin and pearls of Henrietta Maria; while up the marble stairs, watched by a laughing multitude above, streamed Gainsborough girls and Reynolds women, women from the Courts of Elizabeth, or Henri Quatre, of Maria Theresa, or Marie Antoinette, the figures of Holbein and Vandyck, Florentines of the Renaissance, the youths of Carpaccio, the beauties of Titian and Veronese.

'Kitty, make haste!' cried a voice in front as Kitty began to mount the stairs. 'Your quadrille is just called!'

Kitty smiled and nodded, but did not hurry her pace by a second. The staircase was not so full as it had been, and she knew well as she mounted it, her slender figure drawn to its full height, her eyes flashing greeting and challenge to those in the gallery, the diamond genius on her spear glittering above her, that she held the stage, and that the play would not begin without her.

And indeed her dress, her brilliance, and her beauty let loose a hum of conversation—not always friendly.

'What is she?' 'Oh, something mythological!—she's in the next quadrille.' 'My dear, she's Diana!—look at her bow and quiver, and the moon in her hair.' 'Very incorrect!—she ought to have the towered crown!' 'Absurd, such a little thing to attempt Diana!—I'd back Actæon!'

The latter remark was spoken in the ear of Louis Harman, who stood in the gallery looking down. But Harman shook his head.

'You don't understand. She's not Greek, of course; but she's Fairyland. A child of the Renaissance, dream-

ing in a wood, would have seen Artemis so,—dressed up and glittering, and fantastic—as the Florentines saw Venus. Small, too, like the fairies!—slipping through the leaves; small hounds, with jewelled collars, following her!'

He smiled at his own fancy, still watching Kitty with his painter's eyes.

'She has seen a French print somewhere,' said Cliffe, who stood close by. 'More Versailles in it than Fairyland, I think!'

'It is *she* that is Fairyland,' said Harman, still fascinated.

Cliffe's expression showed the sarcasm of his thought. Fairy, perhaps!—with the touch of malice and inhuman mischief that all tradition attributes to the Little People. Why, after that first meeting, when the conversation of a few minutes had almost swept them into the deepest waters of intimacy, had she slighted him so, in other drawing-rooms and on other occasions? She had actually neglected and avoided him,—after having dared to speak to him of his secret! And now Ashe's letter of the morning had kindled afresh his sense of rancour against a pair of people, too prosperous and too arrogant. The stroke in the 'Times' had, he knew, gone home; his vanity writhed under it, and the wish to strike back tormented him, as he watched Ashe mounting behind his wife, so handsome, careless, and urbane, his jewelled cap dangling in his hand.

The quadrille of gods and goddesses was over. Kitty had been dancing with a fine clumsy Mars, in ordinary life an honest soldier and deerstalker, the heir to a Scotch dukedom; having as her *vis-à-vis* Madeleine Alcot,—as the Flora of Botticelli's Spring,—and a slim Mercury in fantastic Renaissance armour. All the divinities of the

Pantheon indeed were there, but in Gallicised or Italianate form; scarcely a touch of the true antique, save in the case of one beautiful girl who wore a Juno dress of white whereof the clinging folds had been arranged for her by a young Netherlands painter, Mr. Alma-Tadema, then newly settled in this country. Kitty at first envied her; then decided that she herself could have made no effect in such a gown, and threw her the praises of indifference.

When, to Kitty's sharp regret, the music stopped and the glittering crew of Immortals melted into the crowd, she found behind her a row of dancers waiting for the quadrille which was to follow. This was to consist entirely of English pictures revived—Reynolds, Gainsborough, and Romney,—and to be danced by those for whose families they had been originally painted. As she drew back, looking eagerly to right and left, she came across Mary Lyster. Mary wore her hair high and powdered,—a black silk scarf over white satin, and a blue sash.

'Awfully becoming!' said Kitty nodding to her—'Who are you?'

'My great-great aunt!' said Mary, curtseying. 'You, I see, go even further back.'

'Isn't it fun?' said Kitty pausing beside her. 'Have you seen William? Poor dear, he's so hot! How do you do?' This last, careless greeting was addressed to Cliffe, whom she now perceived standing behind Mary.

Cliffe bowed stiffly.

'Excuse me. I did not see you. I was absorbed in your dress. You are Artemis, I see,—with additions.'

'Oh! I am an "article de Paris,"' said Kitty. 'But it seems odd that some people should take me for Joan of Arc.' Then she turned to Mary. 'I think your dress is quite lovely!' she said in that warm shy voice she rarely used except for a few intimates, and had never yet been

known to waste on Mary. 'Don't you admire it enormously, Mr. Cliffe?'

'Enormously,' said Cliffe, pulling at his moustache. 'But by now my compliments are stale.'

'Is he cross about William's letter?' thought Kitty. 'Well, let's leave them to themselves.'

Then, as she passed him, something in the silent personality of the man arrested her. She could not forbear a look at him over her shoulder. 'Are you—Oh! of course, I remember—' for she had recognised the dress and cap of the Spanish grandee.

Cliffe did not reply for a moment, but the harsh significance of his face revived in her the excitable interest she had felt in him on the day of his luncheon in Hill Street; an interest since effaced and dispersed, under the influence of that serenity and home peace which had shone upon her since that very day.

'I should apologise, no doubt, for not taking your advice,' he said, looking her in the eyes. Their expression, half bitter, half insolent, reminded her.

'Did I give you any advice?' Kitty wrinkled up her white brows. 'I don't recollect.'

Mary looked at her sharply—suspiciously. Kitty, quite conscious of the look, was straightway pricked by an elfish curiosity. Could she carry him off?—trouble Mary's possession there and then? She believed she could. She was well aware of a certain relation between herself and Cliffe, if, at least, she chose to develop it. Should she? Her vanity insisted that Mary could not prevent it.

However, she restrained herself and moved on. Presently looking back, she saw them still together, Cliffe leaning against the pedestal of a bust, Mary beside him. There was an animation in her eyes, a rose of pleasure on her cheek which stirred in Kitty a queer sudden sympathy. 'I *am* a little beast!' she said to herself — Why shouldn't she be happy?'

Then, perceiving Lady Tranmore at the end of the ball-room, she made her way thither surrounded by a motley crowd of friends. She walked as though on air, 'raining influence.' And as Lady Tranmore caught the glitter of the diamond crescent, and beheld the small divinity beneath it, she too smiled with pleasure, like the other spectators on Kitty's march. The dress was monstrously costly. She knew that. But she forgot the inroad on William's pocket, and remembered only to be proud of William's wife. Since the Parhams' party, indeed, the unlooked-for submission of Kitty, and the clearing of William's prospects, Lady Tranmore had been sweetness itself to her daughter-in-law.

But her fine face and brow were none the less inclined to frown. She herself as Katharine of Aragon would have shed a dignity on any scene, but she was in no sympathy with what she beheld.

'We shall soon all of us be ashamed of this kind of thing,' she declared to Kitty. 'Just as people now are beginning to be ashamed of enormous houses and troops of servants.'

'No,—please!—only bored with them!' said Kitty. 'There are so many other ways now of amusing yourself,—that's all.'

'Well, this way will die out,' said Lady Tranmore. 'The cost of it is too scandalous,—people's consciences prick them.'

Kitty vowed she did not believe there was a conscience in the room; and then, as the music struck up, she carried off her companion to some steps overlooking the great marble gallery, where they had a better view of the two lines of dancers.

It is said that as a nation the English have no gift for pageants. Yet every now and then,—as no doubt in the Elizabethan masque—they show a strange felicity in the

art. Certainly the dance that followed would have been difficult to surpass even in the ripe days and mother lands of pageantry. To the left, a long line, consisting mainly of young girls in their first bloom, dressed as Gainsborough and his great contemporaries delighted to paint these flowers of England,—the folds of plain white muslin crossed over the young breast, a black velvet at the throat, a rose in the hair, the simple skirt showing the small pointed feet, and sometimes a broad sash defining the slender waist. Here were Stanleys, Howards, Percys, Villiers', Butlers, Osbornes,—soft slips of girls bearing the names of England's rough and turbulent youth, bearing themselves to-night with a shy or laughing dignity, as though the touch of history and romance were on them. And facing them, the youths of the same families, no less handsome than their sisters and brides—in Romney's blue coats, or the splendid red of Reynolds and Gainsborough.

To and fro swayed the dancers, under the innumerable candles that filled the arched roof and upper walls of the ball-room; and each time the lines parted they disclosed at the further end another pageant, to which that of the dance was in truth subordinate;—a daïs hung with blue and silver, and upon it a Royal lady whose beauty, then in its first bloom, has been a national possession, since as the 'sea-king's daughter' she brought it in dowry to her adopted country. To-night she blazed in jewels as a Valois Queen, with her court around her, and as the dancers receded, each youth and maiden seemed instinctively to turn towards her as roses to the sun.

'Oh beautiful, beautiful world!'—said Kitty to herself, in an ecstasy, pressing her small hands together—'how I love you!—*love* you!'

Meanwhile Darrell and Harman stood side by side

near the doorway of the ball-room, looking in when the crowd allowed.

'A strange sight,' said Harman. 'Perhaps they take it too seriously.'

'Ah! that is our English upper class,' said Darrell with a sneer. 'Is there anything they take lightly?—*par exemple!* It seems to me they carry off this amusement better than most. They may be stupid, but they are good-looking! I say, Ashe,'—he turned towards the new comer who had just sauntered up to them, 'on this exceptional occasion, is it allowed to congratulate you on Lady Kitty's gown?'

For Kitty, raised upon her step, was at the moment in full view.

Ashe made some slight reply, the slightness of which indeed annoyed the thin-skinned and morbid Darrell, always on the look out for affronts. But Louis Harman, who happened to observe the Under-Secretary's glance at his wife, said to himself, 'By George! that queer marriage is turning out well after all!'

The Tudor and Marie Antoinette quadrilles had been danced. There was a rumour of supper in the air.

'William!' said Kitty in his ear, as she came across him in one of the drawing-rooms, 'Lord Hubert takes me in to supper. Poor me!' She made an extravagant face of self-pity and swept on. Lord Hubert was one of the sons of the house, a stupid and inarticulate Guardsman, Kitty's butt and detestation. Ashe smiled to himself over her fate, and went back to the ball-room in search of his own lady.

Meanwhile Kitty paused in the next drawing-room, and dismissed her following.

'I promised to wait here for Lord Hubert,' she said —'You go on, or you'll get no tables!'

And she waved them peremptorily away. The drawing-room, one of a suite which looked on the garden, thinned temporarily. In a happy fatigue, Kitty leant dreamily over the ledge of one of the open windows, looking at the illuminated space below her. Amid the coloured lights, figures of dream and fantasy walked up and down. In the midst flashed a flame-coloured fountain. The sounds of a Strauss waltz floated in the air. And beyond the garden and its trees rose the dull roar of London.

A silk curtain floated out into the room, under the westerly breeze, then, returning, sheathed Kitty in its folds. She stood there hidden, amusing herself like a child with the thought of startling that great heavy goose, Lord Hubert.

Suddenly a pair of voices that she knew caught her ear. Two persons, passing through, lingered, without perceiving her. Kitty, after a first movement of self-disclosure, caught her own name and stood motionless.

'Well, of course, you've heard that we got through,' said Lady Parham. 'For once Lady Kitty behaved herself!'

'You were lucky!' said Mary Lyster. 'Lady Tranmore was dreadfully anxious——'

'Lest she should cut us at the last?' cried Lady Parham. 'Well, of course, Lady Kitty is "capable de tout."' She laughed. 'But perhaps as you are a cousin I oughtn't to say these things.'

'Oh! say what you like!' said Mary. 'I am no friend of Kitty's and never pretended to be!'

Lady Parham came closer, apparently, and said confidentially—'What on earth made that man marry her? He might have married anybody. She had no money, and worse than no position.'

'She worked upon his pity, of course, a good deal. I saw them in the early days at Grosville Park. She

played her cards very cleverly. And then it was just the right moment. Lady Tranmore had been urging him to marry.'

'Well, of course,' said Lady Parham, 'there's no denying the beauty.'

'You think so?' said Mary, as though in wonder. 'Well, I never could see it. And now she has so much gone off.'

'I don't agree with you. Many people think her the star to-night. Mr. Cliffe, I am told, admires her.'

Kitty could not see how the eyes of the speaker, under a Sir Joshua turban, studied the countenance of Miss Lyster, as she threw out the words.

Mary laughed.

'Poor Kitty! She tried to flirt with him long ago,—just after she arrived in London—fresh out of the convent. It was so funny! He told me afterwards he never was so embarrassed in his life,—this baby making eyes at him! And now—oh no!'

'Why not now? Lady Kitty's very much the rage, and Mr. Cliffe likes notoriety.'

'But a notoriety with—well, with some style—some distinction! Kitty's sort is so cheap and silly.'

'Ah, well, she's not to be despised,' said Lady Parham. 'She's as clever as she can be. But her husband will have to keep her in order.'

'Can he?' said Mary. 'Won't she always be in his way?'

'Always, I should think. But he must have known what he was about. Why didn't his mother interfere? Such a family,—such a history!'

'She did interfere,' said Mary. 'We all did our best'—she dropped her voice—'I know I did. But it was no use. If men like spoilt children they must have them, I suppose. Let's hope he'll learn how to manage her.

Shall we go on? I promised to meet my supper-partner in the library.'

They moved away.

For some minutes Kitty stood looking out, motionless. But the beating of her heart choked her. Strange ancestral things,—things of evil—things of passion—had suddenly awoke as it were from sleep in the depths of her being, and rushed upon the citadel of her life. A change had passed over her from head to foot. Her veins ran fire.

At that moment, turning round, she saw Geoffrey Cliffe enter the room in which she stood. With an impetuous movement she approached him.

'Take me down to supper, Mr. Cliffe. I can't wait for Lord Hubert any more, I'm *so* hungry!'

'Enchanted!' said Cliffe, the colour leaping into his tanned face as he looked down upon the goddess—'but I came to find——'

'Miss Lyster? Oh! she is gone in with Mr. Darrell. Come with me. I have a ticket for the reserved tent. We shall have a delicious corner to ourselves.'

And she took from her glove the little coveted pasteboard, which—handed about in secret to a few intimates of the house—gave access to the sanctum sanctorum of the evening.

Cliffe wavered. Then his vanity succumbed. A few minutes later the supper guests in the tent of the élite saw the entrance of a darkly splendid Duke of Alva, with a little sandalled goddess, all compact, it seemed, of ivory and fire, on his arm.

CHAPTER XI

THE spring freshness of London had long since departed. A crowded season; much animation in Parliament, where the Government to its own amazement had rather gained than lost ground; industrial trouble at home, and foreign complications abroad; and in London the steady growth of a new plutocracy, the result, so far, of American wealth and American brides; in the first week of July, the outward things of the moment might have been thus summed up by any careful observer.

On a certain Tuesday night, the debate on a private member's Bill unexpectedly collapsed, and the House rose early. Ashe left the House with his secretary, but parted from him at the corner of Birdcage Walk, and crossed the park alone. He meant to join Kitty at a party in Piccadilly; there was just time to go home and dress; and he walked at a quick pace.

Two members sitting on the same side of the House with himself were also going home. One of them noticed the Under-Secretary.

'A very ineffective statement Ashe made to-night—don't you think so?' he said to his companion.

'Very! Really if the Government can't take up a stronger line, the general public will begin to think there's something in it.'

'Oh! if you only shriek long enough and sharp enough in England something's sure to come of it. Cliffe

and his group have been playing a very shrewd game. The Government will get their Agreement approved all right, but Cliffe has certainly made some people on our side uneasy. However——'

'However—what?' said the other, after a moment.

'I wish I thought that were the only reason for Ashe's change of tone,' said the first speaker slowly.

'What do you mean?'

The two were intimate personal friends, belonging moreover to a group of Evangelical families well known in English life; but even so the answer came with reluctance:

'Well, you see, it's not very easy to grapple in public with the man whose name all smart London happens to be coupling with that of your wife!'

'I say!——' the other stood still, in genuine consternation and distress,—'You don't mean to say that there's that in it!'

'You notice that the difference is not in *what* Ashe says, but in *how* he says it. He avoids all personal collision with Cliffe. The Government stick to their case, but Ashe mentions everybody but Cliffe, and confutes all arguments but his. And meanwhile, of course, the truth is that Cliffe is the head and front of the campaign, and if he threw up to-morrow, everything would quiet down.'

'And Lady Kitty is flirting with him at this particular moment? Damned bad taste and bad feeling, to say the least of it!'

'You won't find one of the Bristol lot consider that kind of thing when their blood is up!' said the other. 'You remember the tales of old Lord Blackwater?'

'But is there really any truth in it? Or is it mere gossip?'

'Well, I hear that the behaviour of both of them at Grosville Park last week was such that Lady Grosville

vows she will never ask either of them again. And at Ascot, at Lord's—the Opera—Lady Kitty sits with him, talks with him, walks with him, the whole time, and won't look at anyone else. They must be asked together or neither will come,—and "society" as far as I can make out, thinks it a good joke and is always making plans to throw them together.'

'Can't Lady Tranmore do anything?'

'I don't know. They say she is very unhappy about it. Certainly she looks ill and depressed.'

'And Ashe?'

His companion hesitated. 'I don't like to say it, but, of course, you know there are many people who will tell you that Ashe doesn't care twopence what his wife does, so long as she is nice to him, and he can read his books and carry on his politics as he pleases!'

'Ashe always strikes me as the soul of honour!' said the other, indignantly.

'Of course—for himself. But a more fatalist believer in liberty than Ashe doesn't exist,—liberty especially to damn yourself—if you must and will.'

'It would be hard to extend that doctrine to a wife,' said the other—with a grave uncomfortable laugh.

Meanwhile the man whose affairs they had been discussing walked home, wrapped in solitary and disagreeable thought. As he neared the Marlborough House Corner, a carriage passed him. It was delayed a moment by other carriages, and as it halted beside him Ashe recognised Lady M——, the hostess of the Fancy Ball, and a very old friend of his parents. He took off his hat. The lady within recognised him and inclined slightly,—very slightly and stiffly. Ashe started a little and walked on.

The meeting vividly recalled the ball, the *terminus*

a quo indeed from which the meditation in which he had been plunged since entering the park had started. Between six and seven weeks ago, was it?—it might have been a century. He thought of Kitty as she was that night,—Kitty pirouetting in her glittering dress,—or bending over the boy,—or holding her face to his, as he kissed her on the stairs. Never since had she shown him the smallest glimpse of such a mood. What was wrong with her and with himself? Something, since May, had turned their life topsy-turvy, and it seemed to Ashe that in the general unprofitable rush of futile engagements he had never yet had time to stop and ask himself what it might be.

Why, at any rate, was *he* in this chafing irritation and discomfort? Why could he not deal with that fellow Cliffe as he deserved? And what in Heaven's name was the reason why old friends like Lady M—— were beginning to look at him coldly, and avoid his conversation?

His mother, too! He gathered that quite lately there had been some disagreeable scene between her and Kitty. Kitty had resented some remonstrance of hers, and for some days now they had not met. Nor had Ashe seen his mother alone. Did she also avoid him, shrink from speaking out her real mind to him?

Well, it was all monstrously absurd!—a great coil about nothing, as far as the main facts were concerned; although the annoyance and worry of the thing were indeed becoming serious. Kitty had no doubt taken a wild liking to Geoffrey Cliffe,—

'And by George,'—said Ashe, pausing in his walk—'she warned me!'

And there rose in his memory the formal garden at Grosville Park, the little figure at his side, and Kitty's franknesses,—'I shall take mad fancies for people. I sha'n't be able to help it. I have one now, for Geoffrey Cliffe.'

He smiled. There was the difficulty! If only the people whose envious tongues were now wagging could see Kitty as she was, could understand what a gulf lay between her and the ordinary 'fast' woman,—there would be an end of this silly ill-natured talk. Other women might be of the earth, earthy. Kitty was a sprite, with all the irresponsibility of such incalculable creatures. The men and women,—women especially,—who gossiped and lied about her, who sent abominable paragraphs to scurrilous papers,—he had one now in his pocket which had reached him at the House from an anonymous correspondent—spoke out of their own vile experience, judged her by their own standards. His mother, at any rate!—he proudly thought—ought to know better than to be misled by them for a moment.

At the same time, something must be done. It could not be denied that Kitty had been behaving like a romantic excitable child, with this unscrupulous man, whose record with regard to women was probably wholly unknown to her,—however foolishly she might idealise the *liaison* commemorated in his poems. What had Kitty indeed been doing with herself this six weeks? Ashe tried to recall them in detail. Ascot—Lord's,—innumerable parties in London and in the country, to some of which he had not been able to accompany her, owing to the stress of Parliamentary and official work. Grosville Park for instance,—he had been stopped at the last moment from going down there by the arrival of some important foreign news, and Kitty had gone alone. She had reappeared on the Monday, pale and furious, saying that she and her aunt had quarrelled, and that she would never go near the Grosvilles either in town or country again. She had not volunteered any further explanation, and Ashe had refrained from inquiry. There were in him certain disgusts and disdains, belonging to

his general epicurean conception of existence, which not even his love for Kitty could overcome. One was a disdain for the quarrels of women. He supposed they were inevitable; he saw, by the way, that Kitty and Lady Parham were once more at daggers drawn; and Kitty seemed to enjoy it. Well, it was her own affair; but while there was a Greek play, or a Shakespeare sonnet, or even a Blue Book to read, who could expect him to listen?

What had old Lady Grosville been about? He understood that Cliffe had been of the party. And Kitty must have done something to bring down upon her the wrath of the Puritanical mistress of the house.

Well, what was he to do? It was now July. The session would last certainly till the middle of August, and though the American business would be disposed of directly, there was fresh trouble in the Balkan Peninsula, and an anxious situation in Egypt. Impossible that he should think of leaving his post. And as for the chance of a dissolution, the Government was now a good deal stronger than it had been before Easter,—worse luck!

Of course he ought to take Kitty away. But short of resignation how was it to be done? And what even would resignation do,—supposing, *per impossibile*, it could be thought of—but give to gnawing gossip a bigger bone, and probably irritate Kitty to the point of rebellion? Yet how induce her to go with anyone else? Lady Tranmore was out of the question. Margaret French perhaps?

Then, suddenly, Ashe was assailed by an inner laughter hollow and discomfortable. Things were come to a pretty pass when he must even dream of resigning because a man whom he despised would haunt his house, and absorb the company of his wife; when, moreover, he could not even think of a remedy for such a state of things

without falling back dismayed from the certainty of Kitty's temper,—Kitty's wild and furious temper.

For during the last fortnight, as it seemed to Ashe, all the winds of tempest had been blowing through his house. Himself, the servants, even Margaret, even the child,—had all suffered. He also had lost his temper several times,—such a thing had scarcely happened to him since his childhood. He thought of it as of a kind of physical stain or weakness. To keep an even and stoical mind, to laugh where one could not conquer,—this had always seemed to him the first condition of decent existence. And now to be wrangling over an expenditure, an engagement, a letter, the merest nothing,—whether it was a fine day or it wasn't,—could anything be more petty, degrading, intolerable?

He vowed that this should stop. Whatever happened, he and Kitty should not degenerate into a pair of scolds,—besmirch their life with quarrels as ugly as they were silly. He would wrestle with her,—his beloved, unreasonable, foolish Kitty; he ought of course to have done so before. But it was only within the last week or so that the horizon had suddenly darkened—the thing grown serious. And now this beastly paragraph! But after all, what did such garbage matter! It would of course be a comfort to thrash the editor. But our modern life breeds such creatures,—and they have to be borne.

He let himself into a silent house. His letters lay on the hall-table. Among them was a handwriting which arrested him. He remembered, yet could not put a name to it. Then he turned the envelope. 'H'm, Lady Grosville!' He read it, standing there, then thrust it into his pocket, thinking angrily that there seemed to be a good many fools in this world who occupied themselves with other people's business. Exaggeration of course.

damnable *parti pris*! When did she ever see Kitty except with a jaundiced eye? 'I wonder Kitty condescends to go to the woman's house! She must know that everything she does is seen there *en noir*. Pharisaical, narrow-minded Philistines!'

The letter acted as a tonic. Ashe was positively grateful to the 'old gorgon' who wrote it. He ran upstairs, his pulses tingling in defence of Kitty. He would show Lady Grosville that she could not write to him, at any rate, in that strain with impunity.

He took a candle from the landing, and opened his wife's door in order to pass through her room to his own. As he did so, he ran against Kitty's maid, Blanche, who was coming out. She shrank back as she saw him, but not before the light of his candle had shone full upon her. Her face was disfigured with tears, which were, indeed, still running down her cheeks.

'Why, Blanche!' he said, standing still,—then in the kind voice which endeared him to the servants,—'I am afraid your brother is worse?'

For the poor brother in hospital had passed through many vicissitudes since his operation, and the little maid's spirits had fluctuated accordingly.

'Oh no sir, no sir!' said Blanche, drying her eyes, and retreating into the shadows of the room, where only a faint flame of gas was burning—'It's not that, sir, thank you. I was just putting away her ladyship's things,' she said, inconsequently, looking round the room.

'That was hardly what caused the tears, was it?' said Ashe, smiling. 'Is there anything in which Lady Kitty or I could help you?'

The girl—who had always seemed to him on excellent terms with Kitty—gave a sudden sob.

'Thank you, sir,—I've just given her ladyship warning.'

'Indeed?' said Ashe, gravely. 'I'm sorry for that. I thought you got on here very well.'

'I used to, sir. But this last few weeks there's nothing pleases her ladyship. You can't do anything right. I'm sure I've worked my hands off. But I can't do any more. Perhaps her ladyship will find someone else to suit her better.'

'Didn't her ladyship try to persuade you to stay?'

'Yes—but—I gave warning once before—and then I stayed. And it's no good. It seems as if you must do wrong. And I don't sleep, sir. It gets on your nerves so. But I didn't mean to complain. Good-night, sir.'

'Good-night. Don't sit up for your mistress. You look tired out. I'll help her.'

'Thank you, sir,' said the maid, in a depressed voice, and went.

Half an hour later, Ashe mounted the staircase of a well-known house in Piccadilly. The evening party was beginning to thin, but in a side drawing-room a fine Austrian band was playing Strauss and some of the intimates of the house were dancing.

Ashe at once perceived his wife. She was dancing with a clever Cambridge lad, a cousin of Madeleine Alcot's, who had long been one of her adorers. And so charming was the spectacle, so exhilarating were the youth and beauty of the pair, that Ashe presently suspected what was indeed the truth, that most of the persons gathering in the room were there to watch Kitty dance, rather than to dance themselves. He himself watched her, though he professed to be talking to his hostess, a woman of middle age, with honest eyes, and a brow of command.

'It is a delight to see Lady Kitty dance,' she said to him, smiling. 'But she is tired. I am sure she wants the country.'

'Like my boy,' said Ashe. 'I wish to goodness they'd both go.'

'Oh! I know it's hard to leave the husband toiling in town!' said his companion, who as the daughter, wife, and mother of politicians, had had a long experience of official life.

Ashe glanced at her—at her face moulded by kind and scrupulous living—with a sudden relief from tension. Clearly no gossip had reached her. He lingered beside her, for the sheer pleasure of talking to her. But their *tête-à-tête* was soon interrupted by the approach of Lady Parham, with a daughter,—a slim and silent girl, to whom, it was whispered, her mother was giving 'a last chance' this season, before sending her into the country as a failure, and bringing out her younger sister.

Lady Parham greeted the hostess with effusion. It was a rich house, and these small informal dances were said to be more helpful to matrimonial development than larger affairs. Then she perceived Ashe, and her whole manner changed. There was a very evident bristling, and she gave him a greeting deliberately careless.

'Confound the woman!' thought Ashe, and his own pride rose.

'Working as hard as usual, Lady Parham?' he asked her, with a smile.

'If you like to put it so,' was the stiff reply. 'There is of course a good deal of going out.'

'I hope, if I may say so, you don't allow Lord Parham to do too much of it.'

'Lord Parham never was better in his life,' said Lord Parham's spouse, with the air of putting down an impertinence.

'That's good news. I must say when I saw him this afternoon I thought he seemed to be feeling his work a good deal.'

'Oh! he's worried,' said Lady Parham sharply—'worried about a good many things.' She turned suddenly, and looked at her companion,—an insolent and deliberate look.

'Ah! that's where the wives come in!' replied Ashe, unperturbed. 'Look at Mrs. Loraine. She has the art to perfection—hasn't she? The way she cushions Loraine is something wonderful to see.'

Lady Parham flushed angrily. The suggested comparison between herself, and that incessant rattle and blare of social event through which she dragged her husband, conducting thereby a vulgar campaign of her own, as arduous as his, and far more ambitious,—and the ways and character of gentle Mrs. Loraine, absorbed in the man she adored, scatterbrained and absent-minded towards the rest of the world, but for him all eyes and ears, an angel of shelter and protection:—this did not now reach the Prime Minister's wife for the first time. But she had no opportunity to launch a retort, even supposing she had one ready, for the music ceased, and the tide of dancers surged towards the doors. It brought Kitty abruptly face to face with Lady Parham.

'Oh! how d'you do?' said Kitty, in a tone that was already an offence, and she held out a small hand with an indescribably regal air.

Lady Parham just touched it, glanced at the owner from top to toe, and walked away. Kitty slipped in beside Ashe for a moment, with her back to the wall,—laughing and breathless.

'I say, Kitty,' said Ashe, bending over her and speaking in her small ear, 'I thought Lady Parham was eternally obliged to us. What's wrong with her?'

'Only that I can't stand her,' said Kitty. 'What's the good of trying?' She looked up, a flame of mutiny in her cheeks.

'What, indeed?' said Ashe, feeling as reckless as she. 'Her manners are beyond the bounds. But look here, Kitty—don't you think you'll come home? You know you do look uncommonly tired.'

Kitty frowned.

'Home? Why, I'm only just beginning to enjoy myself! Take me into the cool, please,' she said to the boy who had been dancing with her, and who still hovered near, in case his divinity might allow him yet a few more minutes. But as she put out her hand to take his arm, Ashe saw her waver, and look suddenly across the room.

A group parted that had been clustering round a farther door, and Ashe perceived Cliffe, leaning against the doorway with his arms crossed. He was surrounded by pretty women, with whom he seemed to be carrying on a bantering warfare. Involuntarily Ashe watched for the recognition between him and Kitty. Did Kitty's lips move?—was there a signal? If so, it passed like a flash; Kitty hurried away; and Ashe was left, haughtily furious with himself that, for the first time in his life, he had played the spy.

He turned, in his discomfort, to leave the dancing-room. He himself enjoyed society frankly enough. Especially since his marriage had he found the companionship of agreeable women delightful. He went instinctively to seek it, and drive out this nonsense from his mind. Just inside the larger drawing-room, however, he came across Mary Lyster, sitting in a corner apparently alone. Mary greeted him, but with an evident coldness. Her manner brought back all the preoccupations of his walk from the House. In spite of her small cordiality, he sat down beside her, wondering with a vicarious compunction at what point her fortunes might be, and how Kitty's proceedings might have already affected them. But he

had not yet succeeded in thawing her when a voice behind him said:

'This is my dance, I think, Miss Lyster. Where shall we sit it out?'

Ashe moved at once. Mary looked up, hesitated visibly, then rose and took Geoffrey Cliffe's arm.

'Just read your remarks this evening,' said Cliffe to Ashe. 'Well, now I suppose to-morrow will see your ship in port?'

For it was reasonably expected that the morrow would see the American Agreement ratified, by a substantial Ministerial majority.

'Certainly. But you may at least reflect that you have lost us a deal of time.'

'And now you slay us,' said Cliffe. 'Ah! well—"*dulce et decorum est*," etcetera.'

'Don't imagine that you'll get many of the honours of martyrdom,' laughed Ashe,—in Cliffe's eyes an offensive and triumphant figure, as he leant carelessly upon a marble pedestal that carried a bust of Horace Walpole.

'Why?' Cliffe's hand had gone instinctively to his moustache. Mary had dropped his arm, and now stood quietly beside him,—pale, and somewhat jaded, her fine eyes travelling between the speakers.

'Why? Because the heresies have no martyrs. The halo is for the true Church!'

'H'm!' said Cliffe, with a reflective sneer. 'I suppose you mean for the successful?'

'Do I?' said Ashe, with nonchalance. 'Aren't the true Church the people who are justified by the event?'

'The orthodox like to think so,' said Cliffe. 'But the heretics have a way of coming out top.'

'Does that mean you chaps are going to win at the next election? I devoutly hope you may!—*we*'re all as

stale as ditchwater,—and as for places, anybody's welcome to mine!' And so saying, Ashe lounged away, attracted by the bow and smile of a pretty Frenchwoman, with whom it was always agreeable to chat.

'Ashe trifles it as usual,' said Cliffe, as he and Mary forced a passage into one of the smaller rooms. 'Is there anything in the world that he really cares about?'

Mary looked at him with a start. It was almost on her lips to say 'Yes!—his wife.' She only just succeeded in driving the words back.

'His not caring is a pretence,' she said. 'At least Lady Tranmore thinks so. She believes that he is becoming absorbed in politics,—much more ambitious than she ever thought he would be.'

'That's the way of mothers,' said Cliffe, with a sarcastic lip. 'They have got to make the best of their sons. Tell me—what you are going to do this summer.'

He had thrown one arm round the back of a chair, and sat looking down upon her, his colourless fair hair falling thick upon his brow, and giving by contrast a strange inhuman force to the dark and singular eyes beneath. He had a way of commanding a woman's attention by flashes of brusquerie, melting when he chose into a homage that had in it the note of an older world, a world that had still leisure for passion and its refinements, a world still within sight of that other which had produced the *Carte du Tendre*. Perhaps it was this, combined with the virilities, not to be questioned, of his aspect, the signs of hard physical endurance in the face burnt by desert suns, and the suggestions of a frame too lean and gaunt for drawing-rooms, that gave him his spell and preserved it.

Mary's conversation with him consisted at first of much cool fencing on her part, which gradually slipped back, as he intended it should, into some of the tones

of intimacy. Each meanwhile was conscious of a secret range of thoughts,—hers concerned with the effort and struggle, the bitter disappointments and disillusions of the past six weeks,—and his with the schemes he had cherished in the East and on the way home, of marrying Mary Lyster, or more correctly, Mary Lyster's money, and so resigning himself to the inevitable boredoms of an English existence. For her the mental horizon was full of Kitty,—Kitty insolent, Kitty triumphant. For him too Kitty made the background of thought,—environed, however, with clouds of indecision and resistance, that would have raised happiness in Mary could she have divined them.

For he was now not easy to capture. There had been enough and more than enough of women in his life. The game of politics must somehow replace them henceforth,—if indeed anything were still worth while, except the long day in the saddle, and the dawn of new mornings in untrodden lands.

Mingled, all these, with hot dislike of Ashe, with the fascination of Kitty, and a kind of venomous pleasure in the commotion produced by his pursuit of her; interpenetrated moreover, through and through, with the memory of his one true feeling, and of the woman who had died, alienated from and despising him. He and Mary passed a profitless half-hour. He would have liked to propitiate her, but he had no notion what he should do with the propitiation, if it were reached. He wanted her money, but he was beginning to feel, with restlessness, that he could not pay the cost. The poet in him was still strong, crossed though it were by the adventurer.

He took her back to the dancing-room. Mary walked beside him with a dull fierce sense of wrong. It was Kitty of course who had done it,—Kitty who had taken him away from her.

'That's finished,' said Cliffe to himself with a long breath of relief, as he delivered her into the hands of her partner. 'Now for the other!'

Thenceforward, no one saw Kitty and no one danced with her. She spent her time in beflowered corners, or remote drawing-rooms, with Geoffrey Cliffe. Ashe heard her voice in the distance once or twice, answering a voice he detested; he looked into the supper-room with a lady on his arm, and across it he saw Kitty, with her white elbow on the table, and her hand propping a face that was turned,—half mocking and yet wholly absorbed—to Cliffe. He saw her flitting across vistas, or disappearing through far doorways, but always with that sinister figure in attendance.

His mind was divided between a secret fury, roused in him by the pride of a man of high birth and position, who has always had the world at command, and now sees an impertinence offered him which he does not know how to punish—and a mood of irony. Cliffe's persecution of Kitty was a piece of confounded bad manners. But to look at it with the round hypocritical eyes some of these people were bringing to bear on it was really too much! Let them look to their own affairs—they needed it.

At last the party broke up. Kitty touched him on the shoulder as he was standing on the stairs, apparently absorbed in a teasing skirmish with a charming child in her first season, who thought him the most delightful of men.

'I'm ready, William.'

He turned sharply, and saw that she was alone.

'Come along, then! In five minutes more I should have been asleep on the stairs.'

They descended. Kitty went for her cloak. Ashe sent for the carriage. As he was standing on the steps Cliffe pushed past him, and called for a hansom. It

came in the rear of two or three carriages already under the portico. He ran along the pavement and jumped in. The doors were just being shut by the linkman, when a little figure in a white cloak flew down the steps of the house, and held up a hand to the driver of the hansom.

'Do you see that?' said Lady Parham in a voice of suppressed but contemptuous amazement, as she turned to Mary Lyster, who was driving home with her. 'Call my carriage, please!' she said imperiously to one of the footmen at the door. Her carriage, as it happened, was immediately behind the hansom; but the hansom could not move because of the small lady who had jumped upon the step, and was leaning eagerly forwards.

There was a clamour of shouting voices: 'Move on; cabby! move on!' 'Stand clear, ma'am, please,' said the driver, while Cliffe opened the door of the cab, and seemed about to jump down again.

'Who is it?' said an impatient judge behind Lady Parham. 'What's the matter?'

Lady Parham shrugged her shoulders.

'It's Lady Kitty Ashe,' whispered the *débutante*, who was the judge's daughter, 'talking to Mr. Cliffe. Isn't she pretty?'

A sudden silence fell upon the group in the porch. Kitty's high clear laugh seemed to ring back into the house. Then Ashe ran down the steps.

'Kitty, don't stop the way.' He peremptorily drew her back.

Cliffe raised his hat, fell back into the hansom, and the man whipped up his horse.

Kitty came back to the outer hall with Ashe. Her cheeks had a rose flush, her wild eyes laughed at the crowd on the steps, without really seeing them.

'Are you going with Lady Parham?' she said absently to Mary Lyster.

'Yes.'

Kitty looked up, and Ashe saw the two faces as she and Mary confronted each other, — the contempt in Mary's, the startled wrath in Kitty's.

'Come, Miss Lyster!' said Lady Parham, and pushing past the Ashes without a good-night, she hurried to her carriage, drawing up the glass with a hasty hand, though the night was balmy.

For a few moments none of those left on the steps spoke, except to fret in undertones for an absent carriage. Then Ashe saw his own groom, and stormed at him for delay. In another minute he and Kitty were in the carriage, and the figures under the porch dropped out of sight.

'Better not do that again, Kitty, I think,' said Ashe.

Kitty glanced at him. But both voice and manner were as usual. 'Why shouldn't I?' she said haughtily; — he saw that she had grown very white. 'I was telling Geoffrey where to find me at Lord's.'

Ashe winced at the 'Archangelism' of the Christian name.

'You kept Lady Parham waiting.'

'What does that matter?' said Kitty with an angry laugh.

'And you did Cliffe too much honour,' said Ashe. 'It's the men who should stand on the steps—not the women!'

Kitty sat erect. 'What do you mean?' she said in a low menacing voice.

'Just what I say,' was the laughing reply.

Kitty threw herself back in her corner, and could not be induced to open her lips or look at her companion till they reached home.

On the landing, however, outside her bedroom, she

turned and said, 'Don't, please, say impertinent things to me again!' And drawn up to her full height, the most childish and obstinate of tragedy queens, she swept into her room.

Ashe went into his dressing-room. And almost immediately afterwards he heard the key turn in the lock which separated his room from Kitty's.

For the first time since their marriage! He threw himself on his bed, and passed some sleepless hours. Then fatigue had its way. When he awoke, there was a grey dawn in the room, and he was conscious of something pressing against his bed. Half-asleep he raised himself, and saw Kitty, in a long white dressing-gown, sitting curled up on the floor, or rather on a pillow, her head resting on the edge of the bed. In a glass opposite he saw the languid grace of her slight form, and the cloud of her hair.

'Kitty!'—he tried to shake himself into full consciousness—'do go to bed!'

'Lie down!' said Kitty—lifting her arm and pressing him down—'and don't say anything. I shall go to sleep.'

He lay down obediently. Presently he felt that her cheek was resting on one of his hands, and in his semi-consciousness he laid the other on her hair. Then they both fell asleep.

His dreams were a medley of the fancy ball, and of some pageant scene in which Iris and Ceres appeared, and there was a rustic dance of maidens and shepherds. Then a murmur as of thunder ran through the scene, followed by darkness. He half woke, in a hot distress, but the soft cheek was still there, his hand still felt the silky curls,—and sleep recaptured him.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN Ashe woke up in earnest, he was alone. He sprang up in bed, and looked round the darkened room, ashamed of his long sleep; but there was no sign of Kitty.

After dressing, he knocked as usual at Kitty's door.

'Oh! come in,' cried Kitty's lightest voice. 'Margaret's here, but if you don't mind her, she won't mind you.'

Ashe entered. Kitty, as was her wont four days out of the seven, was breakfasting in bed. Margaret French was beside her with a batch of notes, mostly bills and unanswered invitations, with which she was trying to make Kitty cope.

'Excuse me, Mr. Ashe,' Margaret lifted a smiling face. 'I had to be out on business for my brother all day, so I thought I'd come early and remind Kitty of some of these tiresome things while there was still a chance of finding her.'

'I don't know why Guardian Angels excuse themselves,' said Ashe as they shook hands.

'Oh dear, what a lot of them there are!' said Kitty, tossing over the notes with a bored air. 'Refuse them all, Margaret; I'm tired to death of dining out.'

'Not all, I think,' pleaded Margaret. 'Here's that nice woman—you remember—who wanted to thank Mr. Ashe for what he'd done for her son. You promised to dine with her.'

'Did I?' Kitty wriggled with annoyance. 'Well then, I suppose we must. What did William do for her? When I ask him to do something for the nicest boys in the world, he won't lift a finger.'

'I gave him some introductions in Berlin,' laughed Ashe. 'What you generally want me to do, Kitty, is to staff the public service with good-looking idiots. And there I really can't oblige you.'

'Everyone knows that corruption gets the best men,' said Kitty. 'Hullo, what's that?' and she lifted a dinner-card and looked at it strangely.

'My dear Kitty! when did it come?' exclaimed Margaret French in dismay.

It was a dinner-card, whereby Lord and Lady Parham requested the honour of Mr. and Lady Kitty Ashe's company at dinner, on a date somewhere within the first week of July.

Ashe bent over to look at it.

'I think that came ten days ago, he said quietly. 'I imagined Kitty accepted it.'

'I never thought of it from that day to this,' said Kitty, who had clasped her hands behind her head, and was staring at the ceiling. 'Say, please, that'—she spaced out the words deliberately—'Mr. and Lady Kitty Ashe—are unable to accept—Lord and Lady Parham's invitation—&c.——'

'Kitty!' said Margaret firmly, 'there must be a "regret" and a "kind." Think!—ten days! The party is next week!'

'No "regret,"—and no "kind"!' said Kitty, still staring overhead. 'It's my affair please, Margaret, altogether. And I'll see the note before it goes, or you'll be putting in civilities.'

Margaret, in despair, looked entreatingly at Ashe. He and she had often conspired before this to soften down

Kitty's enormities. But he said nothing,—made not the smallest sign.

With difficulty Margaret got a few more directions out of Kitty, over whom a shade of sombre taciturnity had now fallen. Then, saying she would write the notes downstairs and come back, she gathered up her basketful of letters and departed.

As soon as she was alone with Ashe, Kitty took up a novel beside her, and pretended to be absorbed in it.

He hesitated a moment, then he stooped over her and took her hand.

'Why did you come in to visit me, Kitty?' he said in a low voice.

'I don't know,' was her indifferent reply, and her hand pulled itself away,—though not with violence.

'I wish I could understand you, Kitty.' His tone was not quite steady.

'Well, I don't understand myself!' said Kitty shortly, reaching out for a bunch of roses that Margaret had just brought her, and burying her face among them.

'Perhaps, if you submitted the problem to me,' said Ashe, laughing, 'we might be able to thresh it out together!'

He folded his arms and leant against the foot of the bed, delighting his eyes with the vision of her amid the folds of muslin and lace, and all the costly refinements of pillow and coverlet with which she liked to surround herself at that hour of the morning. She might have been a French princess of the old régime, receiving her court.

Kitty shook her head. The roses fell idly from her hand, and made bright patches of blush pink about her. Ashe went on,—

'Anyway, dear,—don't give silly tongues *too* good a handle!'

He threw her a gay comrade's look, as though to say that they both knew the folly of the world, but he perhaps the better, as he was the elder.

'You mean'—said Kitty, calmly,—'that I am not to talk so much to Geoffrey Cliffe?'

'Is he worth it?' said Ashe—'that's what I want to know,—worth the fuss that some people make?'

'It's the fuss and the people that drive one on,' said Kitty under her breath.

'You flatter them too much, darling! Do you think you were quite kind to me last night?—let's put it that way. I looked a precious fool, you know, standing on those steps, while you were keeping old Mother Parham and the whole show waiting!'

She looked at him a moment in silence, at his heightened colour, and insistent eyes.

'I can't think what made you marry me,' she said slowly.

Ashe laughed, and came nearer.

'And I can't think,' he said in a lower voice—'what made you come—if you weren't a little bit sorry—and lean your dear head against me like that, last night.'

'I wasn't sorry,—I couldn't sleep,' was her quick reply, while her eyes strove to keep up their war with his.

A knock was heard at the door. Ashe moved hastily away. Kitty's maid entered.

'I was to tell you, sir, that your breakfast was ready. And Lady Tranmore's servant has brought this note.'

Ashe took it and thrust it into his pocket.

'Get my things ready, please,' said Kitty to her maid. Ashe felt himself dismissed and went.

As soon as he was gone, Kitty sprang out of bed, threw on a dressing-gown, and ran across to Blanche, who was bending over a chest of drawers. 'Why did you say

those foolish things to me yesterday?' she demanded, taking the girl impetuously by the arm, and so startling her that she nearly dropped the clothes she held.

'They weren't foolish, my lady,' said Blanche, sullenly, with averted eyes.

'They were!' cried Kitty—'Of course, I'm a vixen—I always was. But you know, Blanche, I'm not always as bad as I have been lately. Very soon I shall be quite charming again—you'll see!'

'I daresay, my lady,' Blanche went on sorting and arranging the *lingerie* she had taken out of the drawer.

Kitty sat down beside her, nursing a bare foot which was crossed over the other.

'You know how I abused you about my hair, Blanche? Well, Mrs. Alcot said that very night, she never saw it so well done. She thought it must be Pierrefitte's best man. Wasn't it hellish of me? I knew quite well you'd done it beautifully.'

The maid said nothing. But a tear fell on one of Kitty's nightdresses.

'And you remember the green garibaldi?—last week? I just loathed it—because you'd forgotten that little black rosette.'

'No!'—said Blanche looking up—'your ladyship had never ordered it.'

'I did—I did! But never mind. Two of my friends have wanted to copy it, Blanche. They wouldn't believe it was done by a maid. They said it had such style. One of them would engage you, to-morrow, if you really want to go——'

A silence.

'But you won't go, Blanchie, will you?' said Kitty's silver voice. 'I'm a horrid fiend, but I did get Mr. Ashe to help your young man—and I did care about your poor brother—and—and—' she stroked the girl's arm—'I do

look rather nice when I'm dressed, don't I? You wouldn't like a great gawk to dress, would you?'

'I'm sure I don't want to leave your ladyship'—said the girl, choking. 'But I can't have no more——'

'No more ructions?' said Kitty meditating. 'H'm, of course that's serious,—because I'm made so. Well, now look here, Blanchie, you won't give me warning again for a fortnight? whatever I do,—mind. And if by then, I'm past praying for, you may. And I'll import a Russian—or a Choctaw,—who won't understand when I call her names. Is that a bargain, Blanchie?'

The maid hesitated.

'Just a fortnight!' said Kitty in her most seductive tones.

'Very well, my lady.'

Kitty jumped up, waltzed round the room, the white silk skirts of her dressing-gown floating far and wide, then thrust her feet into her slippers, and began to dress as though nothing had happened.

But when her toilette was accomplished, Kitty, having dismissed her maid, sat for some time in front of her mirror in a brown study.

'What *is* the matter with me?' she thought. 'William is an angel, and I love him. And I can't do what he wants—I *can't*!' She drew a long troubled breath. The lips of the face reflected in the glass were dry and colourless, the eyes had a strange shrinking expression. 'People *are* possessed—I know they are. They can't help themselves. I began this to punish Mary,—and now—when I don't see Geoffrey, everything is odious, and dreary. I can't care for anything. Of course I ought to care for William's politics. I expect I've done him harm—I know I have. What's wrong with me?'

But suddenly, in the very midst of her self-examina-

tion the emotion and excitement that she had felt of late in her long conversations with Cliffe returned upon her, filling her at once with poignant memory and a keen expectation to which she yielded herself as a wild sea-bird to the rocking of the sea. They had started,—those conversations—from her attempt to penetrate the secret history of the man whose poems had filled her with a thrilling sense of feelings and passions beyond her ken, —untrodden regions, full no doubt of shadow and of poison, but infinitely alluring to one whose nature was best summed up in the two words curiosity and daring. She had not found it quite easy. Cliffe, as we know, had resented the levity of her first attempt. But when she renewed it, more seriously and sweetly, combining with it a number of subtle flatteries, the flattery of her beauty and her position, of the private interest she could not help showing in the man who was her husband's public antagonist, and of an admiration for his poems which was not so much mere praise as an actual covetous sharing in them, a making their ideas and their music her own,—Cliffe could not in the end resist her. After all, so far, she only asked him to talk of himself, and for a man of his type the process is the very breath of his being, the stimulus and liberation of all his powers.

So that, before they knew, they were in the midst of the most burning subjects of human discussion,—at first in a manner comparatively veiled and general, then with the sharpest personal reference to Cliffe's own story, as the intimacy between them grew. Jealousy, suffering, the 'hard cases' of passion,—why men are selfish and exacting, why women mislead and torment,—the ugly waste and crudity of death,—it was among these great themes they found themselves. Death above all,—it was to a thought of death that Cliffe's harsh face owed its chief spell perhaps in Kitty's eyes. A woman had died

for love of him, crushed by his jealousy and her own self-scorn. So Kitty had been told; and Cliffe's tortured vanity would not deny it. How could she have cared so much? That was the puzzle.

But this vicarious relation had now passed into a relation of her own. Cliffe was to Kitty a problem,—and a problem which, beyond a certain point, defied her. The element of sex of course entered in, but only as intensifying the contrasts and mysteries of imagination. And he made her feel these contrasts and mysteries, as she had never yet felt them; and so he enlarged the world for her, he plunged her, if only by contact with his own bitter and irritable genius, into new regions of sentiment and feeling. For, in spite of the vulgar elements in him, there were also elements of genius. The man was a poet and a thinker, though he were at the same time, in some sense, an adventurer. His mind was stored with eloquent and beautiful imagery, the poetry of others, and poetry of his own. He could pursue the meanest personal objects in an unscrupulous way; but he had none the less passed through a wealth of tragic circumstance; he had been face to face with his own soul in the wilds of the earth; he had met every sort of physical danger with contempt; and his arrogant imperious temper was of the kind which attracts many women, especially perhaps women physically small, and intellectually fearless, like Kitty, who feel in it a challenge to their power and their charm.

His society then had in these six weeks become, for Kitty, a passion,—a passion of the imagination. For the man himself, she would probably have said that she felt more repulsion than anything else. But it was a repulsion that held her, because of the constant sense of re-action, of on-rushing life, which it excited in herself.

Add to these, the elements of mischief and defiance in the situation, the snatching him from Mary, her enemy and slanderer, the defiance of Lady Grosville and all other hypocritical tyrants, the pride of dragging at her chariot wheels a man whom most people courted even when they loathed him, who enjoyed, moreover, an astonishing reputation abroad, especially in that France which Kitty adored, as a kind of modern Byron, the only Englishman who could still display in public the 'pageant of a bleeding heart,' without making himself ridiculous,—and perhaps enough has been heaped together to explain the infatuation, that now like a wild spring gust on a shining lake, was threatening to bring Kitty's light bark into dangerous waters.

'I don't care for him,'—she said to herself, as she sat thinking alone,—'but I must see him—I *will*! And I will talk to him as I please, and where I please!'

Her small frame stiffened under the obstinacy of her resolution. Kitty's will at a moment of this kind was a fatality,—so strong was it, and so irrational.

Meanwhile, downstairs, Ashe himself was wrestling with another phase of the same situation. Lady Tranmore's note had said,—'I shall be with you almost immediately after you receive this, as I want to catch you before you go to the Foreign Office.'

Accordingly, they were in the library, Ashe on the defensive, Lady Tranmore nervous, embarrassed, and starting at a sound. Both of them watched the door. Both looked for and dreaded the advent of Kitty.

'Dear William!' said his mother at last, stretching her hand across a small table which stood between them and laying it on her son's— you'll forgive me, won't you?—even if I do seem to you prudish and absurd. But I am afraid—you *ought* to tell Kitty some

of the unkind things people are saying! You know I've tried, and she wouldn't listen to me. And you ought to beg her—yes, William, indeed you ought!—not to give any further occasion for them.'

She looked at him anxiously, full of that timidity which haunts the deepest and tenderest affections. She had just given him to read a letter from Lady Grosville to herself. Ashe ran through it, then laid it down with a gesture of scorn.

'Kitty apparently enjoyed a moonlight walk with Cliffe. Why shouldn't she? Lady Grosville thinks the moon was made to sleep by,—other people don't.'

'But William!—at night,—when everybody had gone to bed,—escaping from the house,—they two alone!'

Lady Tranmore looked at him entreatingly as though driven to protest, and yet hating the sound of her own words.

Ashe laughed. He was smoking with an air so nonchalant that his mother's heart sank. For she divined that criticism in the society around her which she was never allowed to hear. Was it true indeed that his natural indolence could not rouse itself even to the defence of a young wife's reputation?

'All the fault of the Grosvilles,'— said Ashe after a moment, lighting another cigarette,—'in shutting up their great heavy house and drawing their great heavy curtains on a May night, when all reasonable people want to be out of doors. My dear mother, what's the good of paying any attention to what people like Lady Grosville say of people like Kitty? You might as well expect Deborah to hit it off with Ariel!'

'William,—don't laugh!' said his mother in distress —'Geoffrey Cliffe is not a man to be trusted. You and I know that of old. He is a boaster, and——'

'And a liar!'—said Ashe, quietly. 'Oh! I know that!'

'And yet he has this power over women,—one ought to look it in the face. William!—dearest William!'—she leaned over and clasped his hand close in both hers—'do persuade Kitty to go away from London now—at once!'

'Kitty won't go,' said Ashe quietly. 'I am sorry, dear mother. I hate that you should be worried. But there's the fact. Kitty won't go!'

'Then use your authority,' said Lady Tranmore.

'I have none.'

'William!' Ashe rose from his seat, and began to walk up and down. His aspect of competence and dignity, as of a man already accustomed to command, and destined to a high experience, had never been more marked than at the very moment of this helpless utterance. His mother looked at him with mingled admiration and amazement.

Presently he paused beside her.

'I should like you to understand me, mother. I cannot fight with Kitty. Before I asked her to marry me I made up my mind to that. I knew then and I know now that nothing but disaster could come of it. She must be free—and I shall not attempt to coerce her.'

'Or to protect her!' cried his mother.

'As to that, I shall do what I can. But I clearly foresaw when we married that we should scandalise a good many of the weaker brethren.'

He smiled, but as it seemed to his mother, with some effort.

'William!—as a public man——'

He interrupted her.

'If I can be both Kitty's husband and a public man well and good. If not, then I shall be——'

'Kitty's husband?' cried Lady Tranmore with an accent of bitterness, almost of sarcasm, of which she instantly repented her. She changed her tone.

'It is of course Kitty, first and foremost, who is concerned in your public position,' she said more gently. 'Dearest William—she is so young still—she probably doesn't quite understand, in spite of her great cleverness. But she *does* care,—she *must* care;—and she ought to know what slight things may sometimes affect a man's prospects and future in this country.'

Ashe said nothing. He turned on his heel and resumed his pacing. Lady Tranmore looked at him in perplexity.

'William, I heard a rumour last night——'

He held his cigarette suspended.

'Lord Crashaw told me, that the resignations would certainly be in the papers this week,—and that the Ministry would go on—after a re-arrangement of posts. Is it true?'

Ashe resumed his cigarette.

'True,—as to the facts—so far as I know. As to the date, Lord Crashaw knows, I think, no more than I do. It may be this week, it may be next month.'

'Then I hear,—thank goodness I never see her,' Elizabeth went on reluctantly,—'that that dreadful woman Lady Parham is more infuriated than ever——'

'With Kitty? Let her be! It really doesn't matter an old shoe, either to Kitty or me.'

'She can be a most bitter enemy, William. And she certainly influences Lord Parham.'

Ashe smoked and smiled. Lady Tranmore saw that his pride too had been aroused, and that here he was likely to prove as obstinate as Kitty.

'I wish I could get her out of my mind!' she sighed.

Ashe glanced at her kindly.

'I dare say we shall hold our own. Xantippe is not beloved, and I don't believe Parham will let her interfere with what he thinks best for the party. Will it pay to put me in the Cabinet or not?—that's what he'll ask. I shall be strongly backed too, by most of our papers.'

A number of thoughts ran through Lady Tranmore's brain. With her long experience of London, she knew well what the sudden lowering of a man's 'consideration' —to use a French word—at a critical moment, may mean. A cooling of the general regard,—a breath of detraction coming no one knows whence,—and how soon new claims emerge, and the indispensable of yesterday becomes the negligeable of to-day!

But even if she could have brought herself to put any of these anxieties into words, she had no opportunity. Kitty's voice was in the hall; the handle turned, and she ran in.

'William! Ah!—I didn't know mother was here.'

She went up to Elizabeth, and lightly kissed that lady's cheek.

'Good-morning. William, I just came to tell you that I may be late for dinner, so perhaps you had better dine at the House. I am going on the river.'

'Are you?' said Ashe, gathering up his papers. 'Wish I was.'

'Are you going with the Crashaws' party,' asked Elizabeth. 'I know they have one.'

'Oh dear no!' said Kitty. 'I hate a crowd on the river. I am going with Geoffrey Cliffe.'

Ashe bent over his desk. Lady Tranmore's eyebrows went up, and she could not restrain the word—

'Alone?'

'*Naturellement!*' laughed Kitty. 'He reads me French poetry—and we talk French. We let Madeleine

Alcot come once, but her accent was so shocking that Geoffrey wouldn't have her again!'

Lady Tranmore flushed deeply. The 'Geoffrey' seemed to her intolerable. Kitty, arrayed in the freshest of white gowns, walked away to the further end of the library to consult a Bradshaw. Elizabeth looking up caught her son's eyes;—and the mingled humour and vexation in them, wherewith he appealed to her, as it were, to see the whole silly business, as he himself did. Lady Tranmore felt a moment's strong reaction. Had she indeed been making a foolish fuss about nothing?

Yet the impression left by the miserable meditations of her night was still deep enough to make her say—with just a signal from eye and lips, so that Kitty neither saw nor heard,—'Don't let her go!'

Ashe shook his head. He moved towards the door, and stood there, despatch-box in hand, throwing a last look at his wife.

'Don't be late, Kitty,—or I shall be nervous. I don't trust Cliffe on the river. And please make it a rule that, in locks, he stops quoting French poetry.'

Kitty turned round, startled and apparently annoyed by his tone.

'He is an excellent oar,' she said shortly.

'Is he? At Oxford we tried him for the Torpids——' Ashe's shrug completed his remark. Then, still disregarding another imploring look from Lady Tranmore, he left the room.

Kitty had flushed angrily. The belittling, malicious note in Ashe's manner had been clear enough. She braced herself against it, and Lady Tranmore's chance was lost. For when, summoning all her courage, and quite uncertain whether her son would approve or blame her, Elizabeth approached her daughter-in-law affectionately, trying in timid and apologetic words

to unburden her own heart, and reach Kitty's, Kitty met her with one of those outbursts of temper that women like Elizabeth Tranmore cannot cope with. Their moral recoil is too great. It is the recoil of the spiritual aristocrat; and between them and the children of passion the links are few, the antagonism eternal.

She left the house, pale, dignified, the tears in her eyes. Kitty ran upstairs, humming an air from 'Faust,' as though she would tear it to pieces, put on a flame-coloured hat that gave a still further note of extravagance to her costume, ordered a hansom, and drove away.

Whether Kitty got much joy out of the three weeks which followed must remain uncertain. She had certainly routed Mary Lyster, if there were any final satisfaction in that. Mary had left town early, and was now in Somersetshire helping her father to entertain, in order, said the malicious, to put the best face possible on a defeat which this time had been serious. And instead of devoting himself to the wooing of a Northern constituency where he had been adopted as the candidate of a new Tory group, Cliffe lingered obstinately in town, endangering his chances, and angering his supporters. Kitty's influence over his actions was indeed patent and undenied, whatever might be the general opinion as to her effect upon his heart. Some of Kitty's intimates at any rate were convinced that his absorption in the matter was by now, to say the least, no less eager and persistent than hers. At this point it was by no means still a relation of flattery on Kitty's side, and a pleased self-love on his. It had become a duel of two personalities, or rather two imaginations. In fact, as Kitty, learning the ways of his character, became more proudly mistress of herself and him, his interest in her visibly increased. It might almost be

said that she was beginning to hold back, and he for the first time pursued.

Once or twice he had the grace to ask himself where it was all to end. Was he in love with her? An absurd question! He had paid his heavy tribute to passion if any man ever had, and had already hung up his votive tablet and his garments wet from shipwreck in the temple of the god. But it seemed that, after all said and done, the society of a woman, young, beautiful, and capricious, was still the best thing which the day—the London day at all events—had to bring. At Kitty's suggestion he was collecting and revising a new volume of his poems. He and she quarrelled over them perpetually. Sometimes there was not a line which pleased her; and then, again, she would delight him with the homage of sudden tears in her brown eyes, and a praise so ardent and so refined that it almost compared—as Kitty meant it should—with that of the dead. In the shaded drawing-room, where every detail pleased his taste, Cliffe's harsh voice thundered or murmured verse which was beyond dispute the verse of a poet, and thereby sensuous and passionate. Ostensibly the verse concerned another woman; in truth the slight and lovely figure sitting on the further side of the flowered hearth, the delicate head bent, the finger-tips lightly joined, entered day by day more directly into the consciousness of the poet. What harm? All he asked was intelligence and response. As to her heart, he made no claim upon it whatever. Ashe, by the way, was clearly not jealous,—a sensible attitude, considering Lady Kitty's strength of will.

Into Cliffe's feeling towards Ashe, there entered indeed a number of evil things, determined by quite other relations between the two men,—the relation of the man who wants to the man who has, of the man beaten by the restlessness of ambition to the man who possesses all that the other desires, and affects to care nothing about it,—of

the combatant who fights with rage, to the combatant who fights with a smile. Cliffe could often lash himself into fury by the mere thought of Ashe's opportunities and Ashe's future, combined with the belief that Ashe's mood towards himself was either contemptuous or condescending. And it was at such moments that he would fling himself with most resource into the establishing of his ascendency over Kitty.

The two men met when they did meet—which was but seldom,—on perfectly civil terms. If Ashe arrived unexpectedly from the House in the late afternoon to find Cliffe in the drawing-room reading aloud to Kitty, the politics of the moment provided talk enough till Cliffe could decently take his departure. He never dined with them alone, Kitty having no mind whatever for the discomforts of such a party; and in the evenings when he and Kitty met at a small number of houses, where the flirtation was watched nightly with a growing excitement, Ashe's duties kept him at Westminster, and there was nothing to hinder that flow of small and yet significant incident by which situations of this kind are developed.

Ashe set his teeth. He had made up his mind finally that it was a plague and a tyranny which would pass, and could only be magnified by opposition. But his temper suffered. There were many small quarrels during these weeks between himself and Kitty, quarrels which betrayed the tension produced in him by what was—in essentials—an iron self-control. But they made daily life a sordid unlovely thing, and they gave Kitty an excuse for saying that William was as violent as herself, and for seeking refuge in the exaltations of feeling or of fancy provided by Cliffe's companionship.

Perhaps of all the persons in the drama Lady Tranmore was the most to be pitied. She sat at home, having

no heart to go to Hill Street, and more tied indeed than usual by the helpless illness of her husband. Never, in all these days, did Ashe miss his daily visit to his father. He would come in, apparently his handsome good-humoured self, ready to read aloud for twenty minutes, or merely to sit in silence by the sick man, his eyes making affectionate answer every now and then to the dumb looks of Lord Tranmore. Only his mother sought and found that slight habitual contraction of the brow, which bore witness to some equally persistent disquiet of the mind. But he kept her at arm's length on the subject of Kitty. She dared not tell him any of the gossip which reached her.

Meanwhile these weeks meant for her not only the dread of disgrace, but the disappointment of a just ambition, the humiliation of her mother's pride. The political crisis approached rapidly and Ashe's name was less and less to the front. Lady Parham was said to be taking an active part in the consultations and intrigues that surrounded her husband, and it was well known by now to the inner circle that her hostility to the Ashes, and her insistence on the fact that Cabinet Ministers must be beyond reproach, and their wives persons to whose houses the party can go without demeaning themselves, were likely to be of importance. Moreover, Ashe's success in the House of Commons was no longer what it had been earlier in the session. The party papers had cooled. Elizabeth Tranmore felt a blight in the air. Yet William, with his position in the country, his high ability, and the social weight belonging to the heir of the Tranmore peerage and estates, was surely not a person to be lightly ignored? Would Lord Parham venture it?

At last the resignations of the two Ministers were in the 'Times'; there were communications between the

Queen and the Premier, and London plunged with such ardour as is possible in late July into the throes of cabinet-making. Kitty insisted petulantly that of course all would be well; William's services were far too great to be ignored; though Lord Parham would no doubt slight him if he dared. But the party and the public would see to that. The days were gone by when vulgar old women like Lady Parham could have any real influence on political appointments. Otherwise who would condescend to politics?

Ashe brought her amusing reports from the House or the clubs, of the various intrigues going on, and, as to his own chances, refused to discuss them seriously. Once or twice when Kitty in his presence insisted on speaking of them to some political intimate, only to provoke an evident embarrassment, Ashe suffered the tortures which proud men know. But he never lost his tone of light detachment, and the conclusion of his friends was that as usual 'Ashe didn't care a button.'

The hours passed, however, and no sign came from the Prime Minister. Everything was still uncertain; but Ashe had realised that at least he was not to be taken into the inner counsels of the party.—The hopes and fears, the heartburnings and rivalries of such a state of things are proverbial. Ashe wondered impatiently when the beastly business would be over, and he could get off to Scotland for the air and sport of which he was badly in need.

It was a Friday, in the first week of August. Ashe was leaving the Athenæum with another member of the House, when a newspaper boy rushing along with a fresh bundle of papers passed them with the cry, 'New Cabinet complete! Official list!' They caught him up, snatched a paper and read. Two men of middle age conspicuous in Parliament, but not hitherto in office, one

of them of great importance as a lawyer, the other as a military critic, were appointed, the one to the Home Office, the other to the Ministry of War; there had been some shuffling in the minor offices, and a new Privy Seal had dawned upon the world. For the rest, all was as before, and in the formal list the name of the Honourable William Travers Ashe still remained attached to the Under-Secretaryship for Foreign Affairs.

Ashe's friend shrugged his shoulders, and avoided looking at his companion. 'A bomb-shell, to begin with,' he said; 'otherwise the flattest thing out.'

'On the contrary,' laughed Ashe. 'Parham has shown a wonderful amount of originality. If you and I are taken by surprise, what will be the public be? And they'll like him all the better,—you'll see. He has shown courage and gone for new men,—that's what they'll say. *Vive* Parham! Well, good-bye. Now, please the Lord, we shall get off,—and I may be among the grouse this day week.'

He stopped on his way out of the club to discuss the list with the men coming in. He was conscious that some would have avoided him. But he had no mind to be avoided, and his caustic, good-humoured talk carried off the situation. Presently he was walking homewards, swinging his stick with the gaiety of a school-boy expecting the holidays.

As he mounted St. James' Street a carriage descended. Ashe mechanically took off his hat to the half-recognised face within, and as he did so perceived the icy bow and triumphant eyes of Lady Parham.

He hurried along, fighting a curious sensation, as of a physical bruising and beating. The streets were full of the news, and he was stopped many times by mere acquaintances to talk of it. In Savile Row he turned into a small literary club of which he was a member,

and wrote a letter to his mother. In very affectionate and amusing terms, it begged her not to take the disappointment too seriously. 'I think I won't come round to-night.—But expect me first thing to-morrow.'

He sent the note by messenger and walked home. When he reached Hill Street, it was close on eight. Outside the house he suddenly asked himself what line he was going to take with Kitty.

Kitty, however, was not at home. As far as he could remember, she had gone coaching with the Alcots into Surrey, Geoffrey Cliffe, of course, being of the party. Presently, indeed, he discovered a hasty line from her on his study table to say that they were to dine at Richmond and 'Madeleine' supposed they would get home between 10 and 11. Not a word more. Like all strong men, Ashe despised the meditations of self-pity. But the involuntary reflection that on this evening of humiliation Kitty was not with him,—did not apparently care enough about his affairs and his ambitions to be with him,—brought with it a soreness which had to be endured.

The next moment, he was inclined to be glad of her absence. Such things, especially in the first shock of them, are best faced alone. If indeed there were any shock in the matter. He had for some time had his own shrewd previsions, and he was aware of a strong inner belief that his defeat was but temporary.

Probably, when she had time to remember such trifles, Kitty would feel the shock more than he did. Lady Parham had certainly won this round of the rubber!

He settled to his solitary dinner, but in the middle of it put down Kitty's Aberdeen terrier which, for want of other company, he was stuffing atrociously,—and ran up to the nursery. The nurse was at her supper, and Harry lay fast asleep, a pretty little fellow, flushed into a semblance of health and with a strong look of Kitty.

Ashe bent down, and put his whiskered cheek to the boy's. 'Never mind, old man!' he murmured, 'better luck next time!'

Then raising himself with a smile, he looked affectionately at the child, noticed with satisfaction his bright colour and even breathing, and stole away.

He ran through the comments of the evening papers on the new Cabinet list, finding in only two or three any reference to himself, then threw them aside, and seized upon a pile of books and reviews that were lying on his table. He carried them up to the drawing-room, hesitated between a theological review and a new edition of Horace, and finally plunged with avidity into the theological review.

For some two hours he sat enthralled by an able summary of the chief Tübingen positions; then suddenly threw himself back with a stretch and a laugh.—

'Wonder what the chap's doing that's got my post! Not reading theology, I'll be bound.'

The reflection followed that were he at that moment Home Secretary and in the Cabinet, he would not probably be reading it either,—nor left to a solitary evening. Friends would be dropping in to congratulate,—the modern equivalent of the old 'turba clientium.'

As his thoughts wandered, the drawing-room clock struck eleven. He rose, astonished and impatient. Where was Kitty?

By midnight she had not arrived. Ashe heard the butler moving in the hall and summoned him.

'There may have been some mishap to the coach, Wilson. Perhaps they have stayed at Richmond. Anyway, go to bed. I'll wait for her ladyship.'

He returned to his armchair and his books, but soon drew Kitty's *couvre-pied* over him, and went to sleep.

When he awoke, daylight was in the room. 'What

has happened to them?' he asked himself, in a sudden anxiety.

And amid the silence of the dawn he paced up and down, a prey for the first time to black depression. He was besieged by memories of the last two months, their anxieties and quarrels,—the waste of time and opportunity—the stabs to feeling and self-respect. Once he found himself groaning aloud—'Kitty!—Kitty!—'

When this huge distracting London was left behind, when he had her to himself amid the Scotch heather and birch, should he find her again—conquer her again—as in the exquisite days after their marriage? He thought of Cliffe with a kind of proud torment,—disdaining to be jealous,—or afraid. Kitty had amused herself—had tested her freedom, his patience to the utmost. Might she now be content! and reward him a little, for a self-control, a philosophy, which had not been easy!

A French novel on Kitty's little table drew his attention. He thought not without a discomfortable humour of what a French husband would have made of a similar situation,—recalling the remark of a French acquaintance, on some case illustrating the freedom of English wives. 'Il y a un élément turc dans le mari français, qui nous rendrait ces mœurs-là impossibles!'

À la bonne heure! Let the Frenchman keep up his seraglio standards as he pleased. An Englishman trusts both his wife and his daughter—scorns indeed to consider whether he trusts them or no! And who comes worst off? Not the Englishman—if, at least, we are to believe the French novel on the French *ménage*!

He paced thus up and down for an hour, defying his unseen critics—his mother—his own heart.

Then he went to bed and slept a little. But with the post next morning there was no letter from Kitty. There

might be a hundred explanations of that. Yet he felt a sudden need of caution.

'Her ladyship comes up this morning by train,' he said to Wilson, as though reading from a note,—'there seems to have been a mishap.'

Then he took a hansom, and drove to the Alcots.

'Is Mrs. Alcot at home?' he asked the butler. 'Can I have an answer to this note?'

'Mrs. Alcot has been in her room since yesterday morning, sir. She was taken ill just before the coach was coming round and the horses had to be sent back. But the doctor last night hoped it would be nothing serious.'

Ashe turned and went home. Then Kitty was not with Madeleine Alcot,—not on the coach. Where was she, and with whom?

He shut himself into his library, and fell to wondering, in bewilderment, what he had better do. A tide of rage and agony was mounting within him. How to master it!—and keep his brain clear!

He was sitting in front of his writing-table staring at the floor, his hands hanging before him,—when the door opened and shut. He turned. There with her back to the door stood Kitty. Her aspect startled him to his feet. She looked at him, trembling,—her little face haggard and white, with a touch of something in it which had blurred its youth.

'William!' She put both her hands to her breast, as though to support herself. Then she flew forward, 'William!—I have done nothing wrong—nothing—nothing! William—look at me!'

He sternly put out his hand,—protecting himself.

'Where have you been?' he said, in a low voice—'and with whom?'

Kitty fell into a chair, and burst into wild tears.

CHAPTER XIII

THERE was silence for a few moments except for Kitty's crying. Ashe still stood beside his writing-table, his hand resting upon it, his eyes on Kitty. Once or twice he began to speak, and stopped. At last he said, with obvious difficulty—

'It's cruel to keep me waiting, Kitty.'

'I sent you a telegram first thing this morning.' The voice was choked and passionate.

'I never got it.'

'Horrid little fiend!' cried Kitty, sitting up and dashing back her hair from her tear-stained cheeks. 'I gave a boy half-a-crown this morning to be at the station with it by eight o'clock. And I couldn't possibly either write or telegraph last night—it was too late.'

'Where were you?' said Ashe slowly. 'I went to the Alcots this morning, and—'

'—the butler told you Madeleine was in bed? So she is. She was ill yesterday morning. There was no coach and no party. I went with Geoffrey.'

Kitty held herself erect; her eyes, from which the tears were involuntarily dropping, were fixed on her husband.

'Of course I guessed that,' said Ashe.

'It was Geoffrey brought me the news—here, just as I was starting to go to the Alcots. Then he said he had

something to read me—and it would be delicious to go to Pangbourne—spend the day on the river—and come back from Windsor—at night—by train. And I had a horrid headache—and it was so hot—and you were at the office,'—her lip quivered,—'and I wanted to hear Geoffrey's poems—and so——'

She interrupted herself, and once more broke down—hiding her face against the chair. But the next moment she felt herself roughly drawn forward, as Ashe knelt beside her.

'Kitty!—look at me! That man behaved to you like a villain?'

She looked up—she saw the handsome good-humoured face transformed,—and wrenched herself away.

'He did,' she said, bitterly,—'like a villain.' She began to twist and torment her handkerchief as Ashe had seen her do once before, the small white teeth pressed upon the lower lip,—then suddenly she turned upon him—

'I suppose you want me to tell you the story?'

All Kitty in the words! Her frankness, her daring, and the impatient realistic tone she was apt to impose upon emotion,—they were all there.

Ashe rose and began to walk up and down.

'Tell me your part in it,' he said at last,—'and as little of that fellow as may be.'

Kitty was silent. Ashe looking at her, saw a curious shade of reverie, a kind of dreamy excitement steal over her face.

'Go on, Kitty!' he said sharply. Then, restraining himself, he added with all his natural courtesy,—'I beg your pardon, Kitty, but the sooner we get through with this the better.'

The mist in which her expression had been for a moment wrapped fell away. She flushed deeply.

'I told you I had done nothing vile!' she said passionately. 'Did you believe me?'

Their eyes met in a shock of challenge and reply.

'Those things are not to be asked between you and me,' he said with vehemence, and he held out his hand. She just touched it,—proudly. Then she drew a long breath.

'The day was—just like other days. He read me his poems—in a cool place we found under the bank. I thought he was rather absurd now and then,—and different from what he had been. He talked of our going away—and his not seeing me—and how lonely he was. And of course I was awfully sorry for him. But it was all right till——'

She paused and looked at Ashe—

'You remember the inn near Hamel Weir—a few miles from Windsor—that lonely little place.'

Ashe nodded.

'We dined there. Afterwards we were to row to Windsor and come home by a train about ten. We finished dinner early. By the way there were two other people there—Lady Edith Manley and her boy. They had rowed down from somewhere'—

'Did Lady Edith——'

'Yes—she spoke to me. She was going back to town—to the Holland House party——'

'Where she probably met mother?'

'She did meet her!' cried Kitty. She pointed to a letter which she had thrown down as she entered. 'Your mother sent round this note to me this morning—to ask when I should be at home. And Wilson sent word—There!—of course I know she thinks I'm capable of anything.'

She looked at him, defiant, but very miserable and pale.

'Go on, please,' said Ashe.

'—We finished dinner early. There was a field behind the inn and then a wood. We strolled into the wood, and then Geoffrey—well, he went mad! He——'

She bit her lip fiercely, struggling for composure,—and words.

'He proposed to you to throw me over?' said Ashe, as white as she.

With a sudden gesture she held out her arms—like a piteous child—

'Oh! don't stand there—and look at me like that—I can't bear it.'—

Ashe came—unwillingly. She perceived the reluctance, and with a flaming face she motioned him back, while she controlled herself enough to pour out her story. Presently Ashe was able to reconstruct with tolerable clearness what had occurred. Cliffe, intoxicated by the long day of intimacy and of solitude, by Kitty's beauty and Kitty's folly, aware that parting was near at hand, and trusting to the wildness of Kitty's temperament, had suddenly assumed the language of the lover,—and a lover by no means uncertain of his ultimate answer. So long as they understood each other,—that indeed, for the present, was all he asked. But she must know that she had broken off his marriage with Mary Lyster, and reopened in his nature all the old founts of passion and of storm. It had been her sovereign will that he should love her; it had been achieved. For her sake,—knowing himself for the seared and criminal being that he was—for Ashe's sake,—he had tried to resist her spell. In vain. A fatal fusion of their two natures—imaginations—sympathies—had come about. Each was interpenetrated by the other; and retreat was impossible.

A kind of sombre power indeed,—the power of the poet and the dreamer,—seemed to have spoken from Cliffe's strange wooing. He had taken no particular pains to flatter her, or to conceal his original hesitation. He put her own action in a hard almost a brutal light. It was plain that he thought she had treated her husband badly; that he warned her of a future of treachery and remorse. At the same time he let her see that he could not doubt but that she would face it. They still had the last justifying cards in their hands:—passion—and the courage to go where passion leads. When those were played, they might look each other and the world in the face. Till then they were but triflers,—mean souls—fit neither for heaven nor for hell.

Ashe's whole being was soon in a tumult of rage under the sting of this report, as he was able to piece it out from Kitty. But he kept his self-command, and by dint of it he presently arrived at some notion of her own share in the scene. Horror, recoil, disavowal;—a wild resentment of the charges heaped upon her, of the pitiless interpretation of her behaviour which broke from those harsh lips, of the incredulity passing into something like contempt with which Cliffe had endured her wrath, and received her protestations;—then a blind flight through the fields to the little wayside station where she hoped to catch the last train;—the arrival and departure of the train while she was still half a mile from the line, and her shelter at a cottage for the night:—these things stood out plainly, whatever else remained in obscurity. How far she had provoked her own fate, and how far even now she was delivered from the morbid spell of Cliffe's personality, Ashe would not allow himself to ask. As she neared the end of her story, it was as though the great tempest wave in which he had been struggling died down, and with a merciful rush bore him to a shore of deliver-

ance. She was there beside him; and she was still his own.

He had been leaning over the side of a chair, his chin on his hand, his eyes fixed upon her, while she told her tale. It ended in a burst of self-pity, as she remembered her collapse in the cottage, the impossibility of finding any carriage in the small hamlet of which it made part, the faint weariness of the night—

'I never slept,'—she said piteously. 'I got up at eight for the first train,—and now I feel'—she fell back in her chair, and whispered desolately with shut eyes,—'as if I should like to die!'

Ashe knelt down beside her.

'It's my fault too, Kitty. I ought to have held you with a stronger hand. I hated quarrelling with you. But—oh my dear, my dear!'——

She met the cry in silence, the tears running over her cheeks. Roughly, impetuously, he gathered her in his arms, and kissed her, as though he would once more re-knit and re-consecrate the bond between them. She lay passively against him, the tangle of her fair hair spread over his shoulder—too frail, and too exhausted for response.

'This won't do,' he said presently, disengaging himself, 'you must have some food and rest. Then we'll think what shall be done.'

She roused herself suddenly as he went to the door.

'Why aren't you at the Foreign Office?'

'I sent a message early. Lawson came,'—Lawson was his private secretary—'but I must go down in an hour.'

'William!'

Kitty had raised herself, and her eyes shone large and startled in the small tear-stained face.

'Yes.' He paused a moment.

'William!—is the list out?'

'Yes.'

Kitty tottered to her feet.

'Is it all right?'

'I suppose so,' he said slowly. 'It doesn't affect me.'

And then without waiting, he went into the hall and closed the door behind him. He wrote a note to the Foreign Office to say that he should not be at the office till the afternoon, and that important papers were to be sent up to him. Then he told Wilson to bring wine and sandwiches into the library for Lady Kitty, who had been detained by an accident on the river the night before, and was much exhausted. No visitors were to be admitted, except of course Lady Tranmore or Miss French.

When he returned to the library he found Kitty with crimson cheeks, her hands locked behind her, walking up and down. As soon as she saw him, she motioned to him imperiously.

'Shut the door, William. I have something very important to say to you.'

He obeyed her, and she walked up to him deliberately. He saw the fluttering of her heart beneath her white dress—the crushed, bedraggled dress, which still in its soft elegance, its small originalities, spoke Kitty from head to foot. But her manner was quite calm and collected.

'William!—we must separate!—You must send me away.'

He started.

'What do you mean?'

'What I say. It is—it is intolerable—that I should ruin your life like this.'

'Don't please exaggerate, Kitty! There is no question of ruin. I shall make my way when the time comes,—and Lady Parham will have nothing to say to it!'

'HE GATHERED HER IN HIS ARMS'

'HE GATHERED HER IN HIS ARMS'

'No! Nothing will ever go well—while I'm there—like a millstone round your neck. William!'—she came closer to him—'take my advice—do it! I warned you when you married me. And now you see—it was true.'

'You foolish child,' he answered slowly, 'do you think I could forget you for an hour, wherever you were?'

'Oh yes,' she said, steadily. 'I know you would forget me,—if I wasn't here. I'm sure of it. You're very ambitious, William,—more than you know. You'll soon care——'

'More for politics than for you? Another of your delusions, Kitty. Nothing of the sort. Moreover, if you will only let me advise you—trust your husband a little,—think both for him and yourself,—I see nothing either in politics, or in our life together, that cannot be retrieved.'

He spoke with manly kindness and reasonableness. Not a trace of his habitual indolence or indifference. Kitty listening, was conscious of the most tempestuous medley of feelings,—love, remorse, shame, and a strange gnawing desolation. What else, what better *could* she have asked of him? And yet,—as she looked at him, she thought suddenly of the moonlit garden at Grosville Park, and of that young headlong chivalry with which he had thrown himself at her feet. This man before her,—so much older and maturer,—counting the cost of his marriage with her in the light of experience, and magnanimously, resolutely paying it,—Kitty, in a flash, realised his personality as she had never yet done, his moral independence of her, his separateness as a human being. Her passionate self-love instinctively, unconsciously, had made of his life the appendage of hers. And now——? His devotion had never been so plain, so attested; and all the while, bitter terrifying voices rang upon the inner ear, voices of fate, vague and irrevocable.

She dropped into a chair beside his table, trembling and white.

'No, no,' she said, drawing her handkerchief across her eyes, with a gesture of childish misery,—'It's all been a—a horrid mistake. Your mother was quite right. Of course she hated your marrying me—and now—now she'll see what I've done. I guess perfectly what she's thinking about me to-day! And I can't help it—I shall go on—if you let me stay with you. There's a twist—a black drop in me. I'm not like other people.'

Her voice which was very quiet, gave Ashe intolerable pain.

'You poor, tired, starved child,'—he said, kneeling down beside her. 'Put your arms round my neck. Let me carry you upstairs.'

With a sob, she did as she was told. Ashe's library, a comparatively late addition to the rambling old-fashioned house, communicated by a small staircase at the back with his dressing-room above. He lifted the small figure with ease, and halfway upstairs he impetuously kissed the delicate cheek,—

'I'm glad you're not Polly Lyster, darling!'

Kitty laughed through her tears. Presently he deposited her on the large sofa in her own room, and stood beside her, panting a little.

'It's all very well,' said Kitty, as she nestled down among the pillows,—'but we're *none* of us feathers!'

Her eyes were beginning to recover a little of their sparkle. She looked at him with attention.

'You look horribly tired. What—what did you do—last night?' She turned away from him.

'I sat up reading,—then went to sleep downstairs. I thought the coach had come to grief,—and you were somewhere with the Alcots.'

'If I had known that,'—she murmured—'*I* might

have gone to sleep. Oh, it was so horrible!—the little stuffy room—and the dirty blankets.'—She gave a shiver of disgust. 'There was a poor baby too with whooping-cough.—Lucky I had some money. I gave the woman a sovereign. But she wasn't at all nice—she never smiled once—I know she thought I was a bad lot'—

Then she sprang up.

'Sit there!' She pointed to the foot of the sofa. Ashe obeyed her.

'When did you know?'

'About the Ministry? Between six and seven. I saw Lady Parham afterwards driving in St. James's Street. She never enjoyed anything so much in her life as the bow she gave me.'

Kitty groaned, and subsided again, a little crumpled form among her cushions.

'Tell me the names.'

Ashe gave her the list of the Ministry. She made one or two shrewd or bitter comments upon it. He fully understood that in her inmost mind she was registering a vow of vengeance against the Parhams; but she made no spoken threat. Meanwhile in the background of each mind there lay that darker and more humiliating fact, to which both shrank from returning; while yet both knew that it must be faced.

There was a knock at the door, and Blanche appeared with the tray which had been ordered downstairs. She glanced in astonishment at her mistress.

'We had an accident on the river last night, Blanche,' said Kitty. 'Come back in half an hour. I'm too tired to change just yet.'

She kept her face hidden from the maid, but when Blanche had departed Ashe saw that her cheeks were flaming.

'I hate lying!' she said with a kind of physical

disgust—'and now I suppose it will be my chief occupation for weeks.'

It was true that she hated lying, and Ashe was well aware of it. Of such a battle-stroke indeed as she had played at the ball, when her prompt falsehood snatched Cliffe from Mary Lyster, she was always capable. But in general her pride, her very egotism and quick temper kept her true.

Perhaps the fact represented one of those deep sources whence the well of Ashe's tenderness was fed. At any rate, consciously or not, it was at this moment one of his chief motives for not finding the past intolerable, or the future without hope. He took some wine and a sandwich from the tray and began to feed her. In the middle, she pushed his hands away, and her eyes brimmed again with tears.

'Put it down,' she commanded. And when he had done so, she raised his hands deliberately one after the other and kissed them—crying.

'William!—I have been a horrible wife to you!'

'Don't be a goose, Kitty. You know very well, that—till this last business,—And don't imagine that I feel myself a model either!'

'No,'—she said, with a long sigh. 'Of course you ought to have beaten me.'

He smiled, with an unsteady lip.

'Perhaps I might still try it.'

She shook her head.

'Too late. I am not a child any more.'

Then throwing her soft arms round his neck, she clung to him, saying the most adorable and poignant things, dissolved indeed in a murmuring anguish of remorse; until, with the same unexpectedness as before, she again disengaged herself—urging, insisting that he should send her away.

'Let me go and live at Haggart, baby and I.' (Haggart was one of the Tranmore 'places,' recently handed over to the young people.) 'You can come and see me sometimes. I'll garden,—and write books. Half the smart women I know write stories—or plays. Why shouldn't I?'

'Why, indeed? Meanwhile, madame, I take you to Scotland—next week.'

'Scotland?' She pressed her hands over her eyes. '"Anywhere—anywhere—out of the world!"'

'Kitty!' Startled by the abandonment of her words, Ashe caught her hands and held them. 'Kitty!—you regret——'

'That man? Do I?' She opened her eyes, frowning. 'I loathe him! When I think of yesterday, I could drown myself. If I could pile the whole world between him and me,—I would. But'—she shivered—'but yet,—if he were sitting there——'

'You would be once more under the spell?' said Ashe bitterly.

'Spell!' she repeated with scorn. Then snatching her hands from his, she threw back the hair from her temples with a wild gesture. 'I warned you,'—she said —'I warned you.'

'A man doesn't pay much attention to those warnings, Kitty.'

'Then it is not my fault. I don't know what's wrong with me,'—she said sombrely; 'but I remember saying to you that sometimes my brain was on fire. I seem to be always in a hurry—in a desperate, desperate hurry!—to know or to feel something,—while there is still time,—before one dies. There is always a passion—always an effort. More life—*more life!*—even if it lead to pain—and agony—and tears.'

She raised her strange, beautiful eyes, which had at the moment almost a look of delirium, and fixed them on

his face. But Ashe's impression was that she did not see him.

He was conscious of the same pang, the same sudden terror that he had felt on that never-to-be-forgotten evening when she had talked to him of the Masque in the Tempest. He thought of the Blackwater stories he had heard from Lord Grosville. '*Mad, my dear fellow, mad!*'—the old man's frequent comment ran through his memory. Was there indeed some unsound spot in Kitty?

He sat dumb and paralysed for a moment, then recovering himself, he said as he recaptured the cold little hands,

'"More *light*"—Kitty,—was what Goethe said, in dying. A better prayer—don't you think?'

There was a strong, even a stern insistence in his manner which quieted Kitty. Her face as it came back to full consciousness, was exquisitely sweet and mournful.

'That's the prayer of the *calm*,' she said, in a whisper, 'and my nature is hunger and storm. And Geoffrey Cliffe is the same. That's why I couldn't help being——'

She sprang up—

'William, don't let's talk nonsense. I can't ever see that man again. How's it to be done?'

She moved up and down,—all practical energy and impatience—her mood wholly altered. His own adapted itself to hers.

'For the present, fear nothing,' he said drily. 'For his own sake, Cliffe will hold his tongue, and leave London. And as to the future,—I can get some message conveyed to him,—by a man he won't disregard. Leave it to me.'

'You can't write to him, William!' cried Kitty passionately.

'Leave it to me,' he repeated. 'Then suppose you

take the boy—and Margaret French?—to Haggart, till I can join you?'

'And your mother?' she said, timidly coming to stand beside him, and laying a hand on each shoulder.

'Leave that also to me.'

'How she'll hate the sight of me,' she said under her breath. Then with another tone of voice—'How long, William, do you give the Government?'

'Six months perhaps,—perhaps less. I don't see how they can last beyond February.'

'And then—we'll *fight*!' said Kitty with a long breath, smoothing back the hair from his brow.

'Allow me, please, to command the forces! Well now then, I must be off!' He tried to rise but she still held him.

'Did you have any breakfast, William?'

'I don't remember.'

'Sit still and eat one of my sandwiches.' She divided one into strips, and standing over him began to feed him. A knock at the door arrested her.

'Don't move!' she said peremptorily, before she ran to open the door.

'Please, my lady,' said Blanche, 'Lady Tranmore would like to see you.'

Kitty started and flushed. She looked round uncertainly at Ashe.

'Ask her ladyship to come up,' said Ashe quietly.

The maid departed.

'Feed me if you want to, Kitty,' said Ashe, still seated.

Kitty returned, her breath hurried, her step wavering. She looked doubtfully at Ashe,—then her eyes sparkled —as she understood. She dropped on her knees beside him, kissing the sleeve of his coat, against which her cheek was pressed,—in a passion of repentance.

He bent towards her, touching her hair, murmuring over her. His mind meanwhile was torn with feelings which, so to speak, observed each other. This thing which had happened was horribly serious—important. It might easily have wrecked two lives. Had he dealt with it as he ought, made Kitty feel the gravity of it?

Then the optimist in him asked impatiently what was 'the good of exaggerating the damned business'? That fellow had got his lesson,—could be driven headlong out of his life and Kitty's henceforward. And how could *he* doubt the love shown in this clinging penitence, these soft kisses? How would the Turk theory of marriage, please, have done any better? Kitty had had her own wild way. No fiat from without had bound her; but love had brought her to his feet. There was something in him which triumphed alike in her revolt and her submission.

Meanwhile, in the cool drawing-room to which the green *persiennes* gave a pleasant foreign look, Lady Tranmore had been waiting for the maid's return. She shrank from every sound in the house; from her own reflection in Kitty's French mirrors; from her own thoughts most of all.

Lady Ethel Manley—at Holland House—had been the most innocent of gossips. A little lady who did no wrong herself,—and thought no wrong of others; as white-minded and unsuspicious as a convent child. 'Poor Lady Kitty!—something seemed to have gone wrong with the Alcots' coach, and they were somehow divided from all their party. I can't remember exactly what it was they said,—but Mr. Cliffe was confident they would catch their train. Though my boy,—you remember my boy? they've just put him in the eight!—thought they were running it *rather* fine.'

Then five minutes later, in the supper-room, Lady

Tranmore had run across Madeleine Alcot's husband, who had given her in passing the whole story of the frustrated expedition—Mrs. Alcot's chill, and the despatch of Cliffe to Hill Street. 'Horrid bore to have to put it off!—Hope he got there in time to stop Lady Kitty getting ready. Oh! thanks, Madeleine's all right.'

And then no more, as the rush of the crowd swept them apart.

After that, sleep had wholly deserted Lady Tranmore,—if indeed, after the publication of the Cabinet list in the afternoon, and William's letter following upon it, any had been still possible. And in the early morning she had sent her note to Kitty,—a *ballon d'essai*, despatched in a horror of great fear.

'Her ladyship has not yet returned.' The message from Hill Street, delivered by the footman's indifferent mouth, struck Lady Tranmore with trembling.

'Where is William?' she said to herself in anguish. 'I must find him,—but—what shall I say to him?' Then she went upstairs, and, without calling for her maid, put on her walking things with shaking hands.

She slipped out unobserved by her household, and took a hansom from the corner of Grosvenor Street. In the hansom she carefully drew down her veil, with the shrinking of one on whom disgrace—the long pursuing, long expected,—has seized at last. All the various facts, statements, indications,—as to Kitty's behaviour, which through the most diverse channels had been flowing steadily towards her, for weeks past, were now surging through her mind and memory,—a grievous damning host. And every now and then, as she caught the placards in the streets, her heart contracted anew. Her son, her William, in what should have been the heyday of his gifts and powers,—baffled, tripped up, defeated!—by his own wife, the selfish, ungrateful, reckless child, on whom

he had lavished the undeserved treasures of the most generous and untiring love. And had she not only checked, or ruined his career,—was he to be also dishonoured, struck to the heart?

She could scarcely stand, as she rang the bell at Hill Street, and it was only with a great effort that she could ask her question——

'Is Mr. Ashe at home?'

'Mr. Ashe, my lady, is I believe just going out,' said Wilson. 'Her ladyship arrived just about an hour ago, and that detained him.'

Elizabeth betrayed nothing. The training of her class held good.

'Are they in the library?'—she asked—'or upstairs?'

Wilson replied that he believed her ladyship was in her room, and Mr. Ashe with her.

'Please ask Mr. Ashe if I can see him for a few minutes.'

Wilson disappeared, and Lady Tranmore stood motionless looking round at William's books and tables. She loved everything that his hand had touched, every sign of his character;—the prize books of his college days, the pictures on the wall, many of which had descended from his Eton study, the photographs of his favourite hunter, the drawing she herself had made for him of his first pony.

On his writing-table lay a despatch-box from the Foreign Office. Lady Tranmore turned away from it. It reminded her intolerably of the shock and defeat of the day before. During the past six months she had become more rejoicingly conscious than ever before of his secret, deepening ambition; and her own heart burned with the smart of his disappointment. No one else however should guess at it through her! No sooner had she received his letter from the club, than, after many weeks

of withdrawal from society, she had forced herself to go to the Holland House party, that no one might say she hid herself, that no one might for an instant suppose that any hostile act of such a man as Lord Parham, or any malice of that low-minded woman, could humiliate her son or herself.

Suddenly, she saw Kitty's gloves—Kitty's torn and soiled gloves—lying on the floor. She clasped her trembling hands, trying to steady herself. Husband and wife were together. What tragedy was passing between them?—

Of course there *might* have been an accident; her thoughts might be all mistake and illusion.—But Lady Tranmore hardly allowed herself to encourage the alternative of hope. It was like Kitty's audacity to have come back. Incredible—unfathomable!—like all she did.

'Her ladyship says, my lady, would you please go up to her room?'

The message was given in Blanche's timid voice. Lady Tranmore started, looked at the girl, longed to question her, and had not the courage. She followed mechanically, and in silence. Could she, must she face it? Yes,—for her son's sake. She prayed inwardly that she might meet the ordeal before her with Christian strength and courage.

The door opened. She saw two figures in the pretty, bright-coloured room. William sat astride upon a chair in front of Kitty, who, like some small mother-bird, hovered above him, holding what seemed to be a tiny strip of bread and butter, which she was dropping with dainty deliberation into his mouth. Her face, in spite of the red and swollen eyes, was alive with fun, and Ashe's laugh reflected hers. The domesticity, the intimate affection of the scene:—before these things, Elizabeth Tranmore stood gasping.

'Dearest mother!' cried Ashe starting up.

Kitty turned. At sight of Lady Tranmore, she hung back; her smiles departed; her lip quivered.

'William!'—she pursued him and touched him on the shoulder. 'I—I can't—I'm afraid. If mother ever means to speak to me again—come and tell me.'

And hiding her face, Kitty escaped like a whirlwind.—The dressing-room door closed behind her, and mother and son were left alone.

'Mother!' said Ashe, coming up to her gaily, both hands outstretched. 'Ask me nothing, dear. Kitty has been a silly child—but things will go better now. And as for the Parhams,—what does it matter?—come and help me send them to the deuce!'

Lady Tranmore recoiled. For once the good humour of that handsome face—pale as the face was—seemed to her an offence,—nay, a disgrace. That what had happened had been no mere *contretemps*, no mere accident of trains and coaches, was plain enough from Kitty's eyes,—from all that William did *not* say, no less than from what he said. And still this levity!—this inconceivable levity! Was it true, as she knew was said, that William had no high sense of honour, that he failed in delicacy, and dignity?

In reality, it was the same cry as the Dean's,—upon another and smaller occasion. But in this case it was unspoken. Lady Tranmore dropped into a chair, one hand abandoned to her son, the other hiding her face. He talked fast and tenderly, asking her help—neither of them quite knew for what—her advice as to the move to Haggart,—and so forth. Lady Tranmore said little. But it was a bitter silence; and if Ashe himself failed in indignation, his mother's protesting heart supplied it amply.

PART III

DEVELOPMENT

'Es bildet ein Talent sich in der Stille,
Sich ein Character in dem Strom der Welt.'

CHAPTER XIV

'WHAT does Lady Kitty do with herself here?' said Darrell looking round him. He had just arrived from town on a visit to the Ashes, to find the Haggart house and garden completely deserted, save for Mrs. Alcot, who was lounging in solitude, with a cigarette and a novel, on the wide lawn which surrounded the house on three sides.

As he spoke he lifted a chair and placed it beside her, under one of the cedars which made deep shade upon the grass.

'She plays at Lady Bountiful,' said Mrs. Alcot. 'She doesn't do it well, but——'

'—The wonder is, in Johnsonian phrase, that she should do it at all? Anything else?'

'I understand—she is writing a book,—a novel.'

Darrell threw back his head and laughed long and silently.

'Il ne manquait que cela,' he said,—'that Lady Kitty should take to literature!'

Mrs. Alcot looked at him rather sharply.

'Why not? We frivolous people are a good deal cleverer than you think.'

The languid arrogance of the lady's manner was not at all unbecoming. Darrell made an inclination.

'No need to remind me, Madame!'—A recent exhibition at an artistic club of Mrs. Alcot's sketches had made

a considerable mark.—'Very soon you will leave us poor professionals no room to live.'

The slight disrespect of his smile annoyed his companion, but the day was hot and she had no repartee ready. She only murmured as she threw away her cigarette,—

'Kitty is much disappointed in the village.'

'They are greater brutes than she thought?'

'Quite the contrary. There are no poachers—and no murders. The girls prefer to be married, and the Tranmores give so much away that no one has the smallest excuse for starvation. Kitty gets nothing out of them whatever.'

'In the way of literary material?'

Mrs. Alcot nodded.

'Last week she was so discouraged that she was inclined to give up fiction and take to journalism.'

'Heavens! Political?'

'Oh, *la haute politique*, of course.'

'H'm. The wives of Cabinet Ministers have often inspired articles. I don't remember an instance of their writing them.'

'Well, Kitty is inclined to try.'

'With Ashe's sanction?'

'Goodness, no! But Kitty, as you are aware,'—Mrs. Alcot threw a prudent glance to right and left,—'goes her own way. She believes she can be of great service to her husband's policy.'

Darrell's lip twitched.

'If you were in Ashe's position, would you rather your wife neglected or supported your political interests?'

Mrs. Alcot shrugged her shoulders.

'Kitty made a considerable mess of them last year.'

'No doubt. She forgot they existed. But I think if I were Ashe, I should be more afraid of her remembering.

By the way—the glass here seems to be at "Set Fair"?'

His interrogative smile was not wholly good-natured. But mere benevolence was not what the world asked of Philip Darrell,—even in the case of his old friends.

'Astonishing!' said Mrs. Alcot, with lifted brows. 'Kitty is immensely proud of him,—and immensely ambitious. That of course accounts for Lord Parham's visit.'

'Lord Parham!' cried Darrell, bounding on his seat.—'Lord Parham!—coming here?'

'He arrives to morrow. On his way from Scotland,—to Windsor.'

Mrs. Alcot enjoyed the effect of her communication on her companion. He sat open-mouthed, evidently startled out of all self-command.

'Why, I thought that Lady Kitty——'

'Had vowed vengeance? So, in a sense she has. It is understood that she and Lady Parham don't meet, except——'

'On formal occasions, and to take in the groundlings—' said Darrell too impatient to let her finish her sentence,—'Yes, that I gathered. But you mean that *Lord* Parham is to be allowed to make his peace?'

Madeleine Alcot lay back and laughed.

'Kitty wishes to try her hand at managing him.'

Darrell joined her in mirth. The notion of the white-haired, bullet-headed, shrewd and masterful man who at that moment held the Premiership of England managed by Kitty, or any other daughter of Eve,—always excepting his wife—must needs strike those who had the slightest acquaintance with Lord Parham as a delicious absurdity.

Suddenly Darrell checked himself, and bent forward.

'Where—if I may ask—is the poet?'

'Geoffrey? Somewhere in the Balkans, isn't he?—making a revolution.'

Darrell nodded.

'I remember. They say he is with the Revolutionary Committee at Marinitza. Meanwhile there is a new volume of poems, out—to-day,' said Darrell, glancing at a newspaper, thrown down beside him.

'I have seen it. The "portrait" at the end——'

'Is Lady Kitty.' They spoke under their breaths.

'Unmistakable, I think,' said Kitty's best friend. 'As poetry it seems to me the best thing in the book, but the audacity of it!'—She raised her eyebrows in a half-unwilling, half-contemptuous admiration.

'Has she seen it?'

Mrs. Alcot replied that she had not noticed any copy in the house, and that Kitty had not spoken of it, which, given the Kitty-nature, she probably would have done, had it reached her.

Then they both fell into reverie, from which Darrell emerged with the remark—

'I gather that last year some very important person interfered?'

This opened another line of gossip, in which, however, Mrs. Alcot showed herself equally well-informed. It was commonly reported, at any rate, that the old Duke of Morecambe, the head of Lady Eleanor Cliffe's family, the great Tory evangelical of the north, who was a sort of patriarch in English political and aristocratic life, had been induced by some undefined pressure to speak very plainly to his kinsman on the subject of Lady Kitty Ashe. Cliffe had expectations from the Duke which were not to be trifled with. He had accordingly swallowed the lecture, and after the loss of his election, had again left England with an important newspaper commission to watch events in the Balkans.

'May he stay there!' said Darrell. 'Of course the whole thing was absurdly exaggerated.'

'Was it?' said Mrs. Alcot coolly. 'Kitty richly deserved most of what was said.' Then—on his start—'Don't misunderstand me of course. If twenty actions for divorce were given against Kitty, I should believe nothing—*nothing*!' The words were as emphatic as voice and gesture could make them. 'But as for the tales that people who hate her tell of her, and will go on telling of her——'

'They are merely the harvest of what she has sown?'

'Naturally. Poor Kitty!'

Madeleine Alcot rested her thin cheek on a still frailer hand and looked pensively out into the darkness of the cedars. Her tone was neither patronising nor unkind; rather, the shade of ironic tenderness which it expressed suited the subject, and that curious intimacy which had of late sprung up between herself and Darrell. She had begun, as we have seen, by treating him *de haut en bas*. He had repaid her with manner of the same type; in this respect he was a match for any Archangel. Then some accident—perhaps the publication by the man of a volume of essays which expressed to perfection his acid and embittered talent,—perhaps a casual meeting at a northern country-house, where the lady had found the man of letters her only resource amid a crowd of uncongenial nonentities—had shown them their natural compatibility. Both were in a secret revolt against circumstance and their own lives; but whereas the reasons for the man's attitude—his jealousies, defeats, and ambitions—were fairly well understood by the woman, he was almost as much in the dark about her as when their friendship began.

He knew her husband slightly—an eager, gifted fellow, of late years a strong High Churchman, and well known

in a certain group as the friend of Mrs. Armagh, that Muse—fragile, austere, and beautiful—of several great men, and great Christians, among the older generation. Mrs. Alcot had her own intimates, generally men; but she tired of them and changed them often. Mr. Alcot spent part of every year within reach of the Cornish home of Mrs. Armagh; and during that time his wife made her round of visits.

Meanwhile her thin lips were sealed as to her own affairs. Certainly she made the impression of an unhappy woman, and Darrell was convinced of some tragic complication. But neither he nor anyone of whom he had yet inquired had any idea what it might be.

'By the way—where is Lady Kitty?—and are there many people here?'

Darrell turned, as he spoke, to scrutinise the house and its approaches. Haggart Hall was a large and commonplace mansion, standing in the midst of spreading 'grounds' and dull plantations, beyond which could be sometimes seen the tall chimneys of neighbouring coal-mines. It wore an air of middle-class Tory comfort which brought a smile to Darrell's countenance as he surveyed it.

'Kitty is at the Agricultural Show—with a party.'

'Playing the great lady? *What* a house!'

'Yes. Kitty abhors it. But it will do very well for the party to-morrow.'

'Half the county?—that kind of thing?'

'*All* the county—some Royalties—and Lord Parham.'

'Lord Parham being the end and aim? I thought I heard wheels.'

Mrs. Alcot rose, and they strolled back towards the house.

'And the party?' resumed Darrell.

'Not particularly thrilling. Lord Grosville——'

'Also, I presume, *en garçon*.'

Mrs. Alcot smiled.

'—the Manleys, Lady Tranmore, Miss French, the Dean of Milford and his wife, Eddie Helston——'

'That I understand is Lady Kitty's undergraduate adorer?'

'It's no use talking to you—you know all the gossip. And some county big-wigs, whose names I can't remember—come to dinner to-night.' Mrs. Alcot stifled a yawn.

'I am very curious to see how Ashe takes his triumph,' said Darrell, as they paused half-way.

'He is just the same. No!' said Madeleine Alcot, correcting herself,—'no—not quite. He *meant* to triumph,—and he *knows* that he has done so.'

'My dear lady!'—cried Darrell—'a quite *enormous* difference! Ashe never took stock of himself or his prospects in his life before.'

'Well now—you will find he takes stock of a good many things.'

'Including Lady Kitty?'

His companion smiled.

'He won't let her interfere again.'

'*L'homme propose*'—said Darrell. 'You mean he has grown ambitious?'

Mrs. Alcot seemed to find it difficult to cope with these high things. Fanning herself, she languidly supposed that the English political passion, so strong and unspent still in the aristocratic families, had laid serious hold at last on William Ashe. He had great schemes of reform, and, do what he might to conceal it, his heart was in them. His wife therefore was no longer his occupation, but—

Mrs. Alcot hesitated for a word.

'Scarcely his repose?' laughed Darrell.

'I really won't discuss Kitty any more,' said Mrs. Alcot impatiently. 'Here they are! Hullo!—What has Kitty got hold of now?

Three carriages were driving up the long approach, one behind the other. In the first sat Kitty, a figure beside her in the dress of a nurse, and opposite to them both an indistinguishable bundle, which presently revealed a head. The carriage drew up at the steps. Kitty jumped down, and she and the nurse lifted the bundle out. Footmen appeared; some guests from the next carriage went to help; there was a general movement and agitation; in the midst of which Kitty and her companions disappeared into the house.

Lady Edith Manley and Lord Grosville began to cross the lawn.

'What is the matter?' asked Mrs. Alcot as they converged.

'Kitty ran over a boy'—said Lord Grosville, in evident annoyance. 'The rascal hadn't a scratch, but Kitty must needs pick him up and drive him home with a nurse. "I ain't hurt, mum," says the boy. "Oh! but you must be," said Kitty. I offered to take him to his mother and give him half-a-crown. "It's my duty to look after him," says Kitty. And she lifted him up herself—dirty little vagabond!—and put him in the carriage. There were some labourers and grooms standing near, and one of them sang out "Three cheers for Lady Kitty Ashe!" Such a ridiculous scene as you never saw!'

The old man shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

'Lady Kitty is always so kind,'—said the amicable Lady Edith. 'But her pretty dress—I *was* sorry!'

'Oh no!—only an excuse for a new one,' said Mrs. Alcot.

The Dean and Lady Tranmore approached—behind them again Ashe and Mrs. Winston.

'Well, old fellow!' said Ashe, clapping a hand on Darrell's shoulder. 'Uncommonly glad to see you. You look as though that d——d London had been squeezing the life out of you. Come for a stroll before dinner?'

The two men accordingly left the talkers on the lawn, and struck into the park. Ashe in a straw hat and light suit made his usual impression of strength and good humour. He was gay, friendly, amusing as ever. But Darrell was not long in discovering, or imagining signs of change. Anyone else would have thought Ashe's talk frankness—nay, indiscretion—itself. Darrell at once divined, or imagined in it, shades of official reserve, tracts of reticence, such as an old friend had a right to resent.

'One can see what a personage he feels himself!'

Yet Darrell would have been the first to own that Ashe had some right to feel himself a personage. The sudden revelation of his full intellectual power, and of his influence in the country, for which the General Election of the preceding winter had provided the opportunity, was still an exciting memory among journalists and politicians. He had gone into the election a man slightly discredited, on whose future nobody took much trouble to speculate. He had emerged from it,—after a series of speeches laying down the principles and vindicating the action of his party,—one of the most important men in England, with whom Lord Parham himself must henceforth treat on quasi-equal terms. Ashe was now Home Secretary, and if Lord Parham's gout should take an evil turn, there was no saying to what height fortune might not soon conduct him.

The will—the iron purpose—with which it had all been done,—that was the amazing part of it. The complete independence, moreover. Darrell imagined that Lord Parham must often have regretted the small intrigue by which Ashe's promotion had been barred in the crisis of the summer. It had roused an indolent man to action, and freed him from any particular obligation towards the leader who had ill-treated him. Ashe's campaign had not been in all respects convenient; but Lord Parham had had to put up with it.

The summer evening broadened as the two men sauntered on through the park, beside a small stream fringed with yellow flags. Even the dingy Midland landscape, with its smoke-blackened woods and lifeless grass, assumed a glory of great light; the soft interlacing clouds parted before the dying sun; the water received the golden flood, and each coot and water-hen shone jet and glossy in the blaze. A few cries of birds, the distant shouts of harvesters, the rustling of the water-flags along the stream, these were the only sounds,—traditional sounds of English peace.

'Jolly, isn't it?' said Ashe looking round him—'even this spoilt country! Why did we go and stifle in that beastly show!'

The sensuous pleasure and relaxation of his mood communicated itself to Darrell. They talked more intimately, more freely than they had done for months. Darrell's gnawing consciousness of his own meaner fortunes, as contrasted with the brilliant and expanding career of his school-friend, softened and relaxed. He almost forgave Ashe the successes of the winter, and that subtly heightened tone of authority and self-confidence which here and there bore witness to them, in the manner or talk of the Minister. They scarcely touched on politics however. Both were tired, and their talk drifted into the characteristic male gossip,—'What's —— doing now?' 'Do you ever see So-and-so?' 'You remember that fellow at Univ?'—and the like,—to the agreeable accompaniment of Ashe's best cigars.

So pleasant was the half-hour, so strongly had the old college intimacy reasserted itself, that suddenly a thought struck upward in Darrell's mind. He had not come to Haggart bent merely on idle holiday,—far from it. At the moment he was weary of literature as a profession, and sharply conscious that the time for vague ambitions had gone by. A post had presented itself, a

post of importance, in the gift of the Home Office. It meant no doubt the abandonment of more brilliant things; Darrell was content to abandon them. His determination to apply for it seemed indeed to himself an act of modesty—almost of sacrifice. As to the technical qualifications required, he was well aware there might be other men better equipped than himself. But after all to what may not general ability aspire,—general ability properly stiffened with interest?

And as to interest, when was it ever to serve him, if not now?—through his old friendship with Ashe. Chivalry towards a much-solicited mortal, also your friend,—even the subtler self-love,—might have counselled silence,—or at least approaches more gradual. It had been far from his purpose indeed to speak so promptly. But here were the hour and the man! And there, in a distant country town, a woman—whereof the mere existence was unsuspected by Darrell's country-house acquaintance—sat waiting, in whose eyes the post in question loomed as a condition,—perhaps indispensable. Darrell's secret eagerness could not withstand the temptation.

So with a nervous beginning—'By the way, I wished to consult you about a personal matter.—Of course, answer or not as you like.—Naturally, I understand the difficulties!'—the plunge was taken, and the petitioner soon in full career.

After a first start,—a lifted brow of astonishment—Ashe was uncomfortably silent,—till suddenly in a pause of Darrell's eloquence, his face changed, and with a burst of his old careless freedom and affection, he flung an arm along Darrell's shoulder, with an impetuous—

'I say, old fellow—don't—don't be a damned fool!'

An ashen white overspread the countenance of the man thus addressed. His lips twitched. He walked on in silence. Ashe looked at him—stammered—

'Why, my dear Philip, it would be the extinguishing of you!'

Darrell said nothing. Ashe, still holding his friend captive, descanted hurriedly on the disadvantages of the post 'for a man of your gifts,' then—more cautiously—on its special requirements, not one of which did Darrell possess,—hinted at the men applying for it, at the scientific and professional influences then playing upon himself, at his strong sense of responsibility—'Too bad, isn't it, that a duffer like me should have to decide these things,'—and so on.

In vain. Darrell laughed, recovered himself, changed the subject; but as they walked quickly back to the house, Ashe knew perchance that he had lost a friend; and Darrell's smarting soul had scored another reckoning against a day to come.

As they neared the house they found a large group still lingering on the lawn, and Kitty just emerging from a garden door. She came out accompanied by the handsome Cambridge lad who had been her partner at Lady Crashaw's dance. He was evidently absorbed in her society, and they approached in high spirits laughing and teasing each other.

'Well, Kitty, how's the bruised one?' said Ashe as he sank into a chair beside Mrs. Alcot.

'Doing finely,' said Kitty. 'I shall send him home to-night.'

'Meanwhile, have you put him up in my dressing-room? I only ask for information.'

'There wasn't another corner,' said Kitty.

'There!' Ashe appealed to gods and men. 'How do you expect me to dress for dinner?'

'Oh now, William, don't be tiresome!' said Kitty impatiently. 'He was bruised black and blue—'('Serve him

right for getting in the way,' grumbled Lord Grosville)—'and Nurse and I have done him up in arnica.'

She came to stand by Ashe, talking in an undertone and as fast as possible. The little Dean, who never could help watching her, thought her more beautiful,—and wilder,—than ever. Her eyes,—it was hardly enough to say they shone,—they glittered—in her delicate face; her gestures were more extravagant than he remembered them; her movements restlessness itself.

Ashe listened with patience,—then said—

'I can't help it, Kitty—you really must have him removed.'

'Impossible!' she said, her cheek flaming.

'I'll go and talk to Wilson, he'll manage it,' said Ashe, getting up.

Kitty pursued him, arguing incessantly.

He lounged along, turning every now and then to look at her, smiling and demurring,—his hat on the back of his head.

'You see the difference'—said Mrs. Alcot in Darrell's ear. 'Last year Kitty would have got her way. This year she won't.'

Darrell shrugged his shoulders.

'These domesticities should be kept out of sight, don't you think?'

Madeleine Alcot looked at him curiously.

'Did you have a pleasant walk?' she said.

Darrell made a little face.

'The great man was condescending.'

Madeleine Alcot's face was still interrogative.

'A touch of the *folie des grandeurs*?'

'Well, who escapes it?' said Darrell, bitterly.

Most of the party had dispersed. Only Lady Tranmore and Margaret French were on the lawn. Margaret

was writing some household notes for Kitty; Lady Tranmore sat in meditation, with a book before her which she was not reading. Miss French glanced at her from time to time. Ashe's mother was beginning to show the weight of years far more plainly than she had yet done. In these last three years the face had perceptibly altered; so had the hair. The long strain of nursing, and that pathetic change which makes of the husband who has been a woman's pride and shelter her half-conscious dependent, had no doubt left deep marks upon a beauty which had so long resisted time. And yet Margaret French believed it was rather with her son than with her husband that the constant and wearing anxiety of Lady Tranmore's life should be connected. All the ambition, the pride of race and history which had been disappointed in her husband had poured themselves into her devotion to her son. She lived now for his happiness and success. And both were constantly threatened by the personality and the presence of Kitty.

Such at least, as Margaret French well knew, was the inmost persuasion—fast becoming a fanaticism—of Ashe's mother. William might indeed for the moment have triumphed over the consequences of Kitty's bygone behaviour. But the reckless untamed character was there still at his side, preparing Heaven knew what pitfalls and catastrophes. Lady Tranmore lived in fear. And under the outward sweetness and dignity of her manner, was there not developing something worse than fear,—that hatred which is one of the strange births of love?

If so, was it just? There were many moments when Margaret would have indignantly denied it.

It was true indeed that Kitty's eccentricity seemed to develop with every month that passed. The preceding winter had been marked, first by a mad folly of

table-turning,—involving the pursuit of a particular medium whose proceedings had ultimately landed him in the dock; then by a headlong passion for hunting, accompanied by a series of new flirtations, each more unseemly than its predecessor, as it seemed to Lady Tranmore. Afterwards,—during the General Election,—a political phase! Kitty had most unfortunately discovered that she could speak in public, and had fallen in love with the sound of her own voice. In Ashe's own contest, her sallies and indiscretions had already begun to do mischief, when Lady Tranmore had succeeded in enticing her to London by the bait of a French *clairvoyante*; with whom Kitty nightly tempted the gods who keep watch over the secrets of fate,—till William's poll had been declared.

All this was deplorably true. And yet no one could say that Kitty in this chequered year had done her husband much harm. Ashe was no longer her blind slave; and his career had carried him to heights with which even his mother might have been satisfied. Sometimes Margaret was inclined to think that Kitty had now less influence with him, and his mother more, than was the just due of each. She—the younger woman—felt the tragedy of Ashe's new and growing emancipation. Secretly—often—she sided with Kitty!

'Margaret!'

The voice was Kitty's. She came running out, her pale pink skirts flying round her. 'Have you seen the babe?'

Margaret replied that he and his nurse were just in sight.

Kitty fled over the lawn to meet the child's perambulator. She lifted him out, and carried him in her arms towards Margaret and Lady Tranmore.

'Isn't it piteous?' said Margaret under her breath, as the mother and child approached. Lady Tranmore gave her a sad assenting look.

For during the last six months the child had shown signs of brain mischief—a curious apathy, broken now and then by fits of temper. The doctors were not encouraging. And Kitty varied between the most passionate attempts to rouse the child's failing intelligence, and days—even weeks—when she could hardly bring herself to see him at all.

She brought him now to a seat beside Lady Tranmore. She had been trying to make him take notice of a new toy. But the child looked at her with blank and glassy eyes, and the toy fell from his hand.

'He hardly knows me,' said Kitty in a low voice of misery, as she clasped her hands round the baby of three, and looked into his face, as though she would drag from it some sign of mind and recognition.

But the blue eyes betrayed no glimmer of response, till suddenly—with a gesture as of infinite fatigue, the child threw itself back against her, laying its fair head upon her breast with a long sigh.

Kitty gave a sob, and bent over him, kissing—and kissing him.

'Dear Kitty!'—said Lady Tranmore, much moved. 'I think—partly—he is tired with the heat.'

Kitty shook her head.

'Take him!' she said to the nurse—'take him! I can't bear it.'

The nurse took him from her, and Kitty dried her tears, with a kind of fierceness.

'There is the post'! she said springing up, as though determined to throw off her grief as quickly as possible; while the nurse carried the child away.

The footman brought the letters across the lawn.

There were some for Lady Tranmore, and for Margaret French. In the general opening and reading that ensued, neither lady noticed Kitty for a while. Suddenly Margaret French looked up. She saw Kitty sitting motionless with a book on her lap, a book of which the wrapper lay on the grass beside her. Her finger kept a page; her eyes full of excitement were fixed on the distant horizon of the park, the hurried breathing was plainly noticeable under the thin bodice.

'Kitty—time to dress!' said Margaret touching her.

Kitty rose, without a word to either of them, and walked quickly away, her hands still holding the book dropped in front of her, her eyes on the ground.

'Oh! Kitty!' cried Margaret in laughing protest, as she stooped to pick up the litter of Kitty's letters, some of them still unopened, which lay scattered on the grass. as they had fallen unheeded from her lap.

But the little figure in the trailing skirts was already out of hearing.

At dinner Kitty was in her wildest spirits,—a sparkling vision of diamonds and lace, much beyond—so it seemed to Lord Grosville—what the occasion required. 'Dressed out like a comedy queen at a fair!' was his inward comment, and he already rolled the phrases in which he should describe the whole party to his wife. Like the expected Lord Parham, he was there in sign of semi-reconciliation. Nothing would have induced Kitty to invite her aunt; the memory of a certain Sunday was too strong. On her side Lady Grosville averred that nothing would have induced her to sit at Kitty's board. As to this, her husband cherished a certain scepticism. However, her resolution was not tried. It was Ashe, in fact, who had invited Lord Grosville, and Lord Grosville—who was master in his own house, and had no mind to break with

William Ashe just as that gentleman's company became even better worth having than usual—had accepted the invitation.

But his patience was sorely tried by Kitty. After dinner she insisted on table-turning, and Lord Grosville was dragged breathless through the drawing-room window, in pursuit of a table that broke a chair and finally danced upon a flower-bed. His theology was harassed by these proceedings, and his digestion upset. The Dean took it with smiles; but then the Dean was a Latitudinarian.

Afterwards Kitty and the Cambridge boy—Eddie Helston—performed a duologue in French for the amusement of the company. Whatever could be understood in it had better not have been understood,—such at least was Lord Grosville's impression. He wondered how Ashe—who laughed immoderately—could allow his wife to do such things; and his only consolation was that, for once, the Dean—whose fancy for Kitty was ridiculous!—seemed to be disturbed. He had at any rate walked away to the library in the middle of the piece. Kitty was of course making a fool of the boy all through. Any one could see that he was head over ears in love with her. And she seemed to have all sorts of mysterious understandings with him. Lord Grosville was certain they passed each other notes, and made assignations. And one night, on going up himself to bed very late, he had actually come upon the pair, pacing up and down the long passage after midnight!—Kitty in such a *négligé* as only an actress should wear, with her hair about her ears,—and the boy out of his wits, and off his balance, as anyone could see. Kitty indeed had been quite unabashed,—trying even to draw *him* into their unseemly talk, about some theatrical nonsense or other; and such blushes as there were had been entirely left to the boy.

He supposed there was no harm in it. The lad was not a Geoffrey Cliffe, and it was no doubt Kitty's mad love of excitement which impelled her to these defiances of convention. But Ashe should put his foot down; there was no knowing with a creature so wild and so lovely where these things might end. And after the scandal of last year—

As to that scandal, Lord Grosville, as a man of the world, by no means endorsed the lurid imaginations of his wife. Kitty and Cliffe had certainly behaved badly at Grosville Park,—that is to say, judged by any ordinary standards. And the gossip of the season had apparently gathered and culminated round some incident of a graver character than the rest,—though nobody precisely knew what it might be. But it seemed that Ashe had at last asserted himself; and if in Kitty's abrupt departure to the country, and the sudden dissolution of the intimacy between herself and Cliffe, those who loved her not had read what dark things they pleased, her uncle by marriage was quite content to see in it a mere disciplinary act on the part of the husband.

Lord Grosville believed that some rumours as to Cliffe's private character had entered into the decisive defeat,—in a constituency largely Nonconformist—which had befallen that gentleman at the polls. Poor Lady Tranmore! He saw her anxieties in her face, and was truly sorry for her. At the same time, inveterate gossip that he was, he regarded her with a kind of hunger. If she only *would* talk things over with him!—So far however she had given him very little opening. If she ever did, he would certainly advise her to press something like a temporary separation on her son. Why should not Lady Kitty be left at Haggart when the next session began? Lord Grosville, who had been a friend of Melbourne's, recalled the early history of that great man.

When Lady Caroline Lamb had become too troublesome to a political husband, she had been sent to Brocket. And then Mr. Lamb was only Irish Secretary,—without a seat in the Cabinet. How was it possible to take an important share in steering the ship of state, and to look after a giddy wife at the same time?

Ashe and his guests lingered late below stairs. When, somewhere about one o'clock he entered his dressing-room, he was suddenly alarmed by a smell of burning. It seemed to come from Kitty's room. He knocked hastily at her door.

'Kitty!'

No answer. He opened the door, and stood arrested.

The room was in complete darkness save for some weird object in the centre of it, on which a fire was burning, sending up a smoke which hung about the room. Ashe recognised an old Spanish brazier of beaten copper, standing on iron feet, which had been a purchase of his own in days when he trifled with *bric-à-brac*. Upon it, a heap of some light material, which fluttered and crackled as it burnt, was blazing and smoking away, while beside it, her profile set and waxen amid the drifts of smoke, her fair hair blanched to whiteness by the strange illumination from below, and all her slight form, chequered with the light and shade of the fire, drawn into a curve of watchfulness vindictive and intent,—stood Kitty.

'What in the name of fortune are you doing, Kitty?' cried Ashe.

She made no answer, and he approached. Then he saw that in the centre of the pile and propped up against some small pieces of wood, a photograph of Geoffrey Cliffe was consuming slowly and dismally. The fire had just sent a line across his cheek. The lower limbs were already charred, and the right hand was shrivelling.

All around were letters, mostly consumed. While at the top of the pile above the culprit's head, stuck in a cleft stick, and just beginning to be licked by the flames, was what seemed to be a leaf torn out of a book. The book from which it had apparently been wrenched lay open on a chair near.

Kitty drew a long breath, as Ashe came near her.

'Keep off—' she said,—'don't touch it!'

'You little goose!' cried Ashe—'what are you about?'

'Burning a coward in effigy,'—said Kitty, between her teeth.

Ashe thrust his hands into his pockets.

'I wish to God you'd forget the creature! instead of flattering him with these attentions!'

Kitty made no reply, but as she drew the fire together Ashe captured her hand.

'What's he been doing now, Kitty?'

'There are his poems,' said Kitty, pointing to the chair. 'The last one is about me.'

'May I be allowed to see it?'

'It isn't there.'

'Ah!—I see. You've topped the pile with it. With your leave, I'll delay its doom.' He snatched the leaf from its stick, and bending down read it by the light of the burning paper. Kitty watched him, frowning, her hand on her hip, the white wrap she wore over her night-dress twining round her in close folds,—a slender, brooding sorceress, some Canidia or Simaetha, interrupted in her ritual of hate.

But Ashe was in no mood for literary reminiscence. His lip was contemptuous, his brow angry, as he replaced the leaf in its cleft stick, whither the flames immediately pursued it.

'Wretched stuff, and damned impertinence!—that's

all there is to say. For Heaven's sake, Kitty, don't let anyone suppose you mind the thing—for an instant!'

She looked at him with strange eyes, 'But if I do mind it?'

His face darkened to the shade of hers. 'Does that mean—that you still think of him,—still wish to see him?'

'I don't know,' said Kitty slowly. The fire had died away. Nothing but a few charred remnants remained in the brazier. Ashe lit the gas, and disclosed a tragic Kitty, flushed by the audacity of her last remark. He took her masterfully in his arms.

'That was bravado,' he said, kissing her. 'You love *me*! And I may be a poor stick—but I'm worth a good many Cliffes. Defy me—and I'll write you a better poem too!'

The colour leapt afresh in Kitty's cheek. She pushed him away and, holding him, perused his handsome scornful face, and all the manly strength of form and attitude. Her own lids wavered.

'What a silly scene!' she said, and fell—a little soft yielding form—into his arms.

CHAPTER XV

THE church clock of Haggart village had just struck half-past six. A white sunny mist enwrapped the park and garden. Voices and shouts rang through the mist; little could yet be seen, but the lawns and the park seemed to be pervaded with bustle and preparation, and every now and then, as the mist drifted, groups of workmen could be distinguished, marquees emerged, flags floated, and carts laden with benches and tressle-tables rumbled slowly over the roads and tracks of the park.

The house itself was full of gardeners, arranging banks of magnificent flowers in the hall and drawing-rooms, and superintended by the head gardener, a person of much greater dignity than Ashe himself, who swore at any underling making a noise, as though the slumbers of the 'quality' in the big house overhead, and the danger of disturbing them, were the dearest interests of a burdened life.

As to the mistress of the house, at any rate, there was no need for caution. The clocks of the house had barely followed the church clock in striking the half-hour, when the workmen on the ground floor saw Lady Kitty come downstairs, and go through the drawing-room window into the garden. There she gave her opinion on the preparations, pushing on afterwards into the park, where she astounded the various contractors and their workmen by her appearance at such an hour, and by the vigour and decision of her orders. Finally she left the park

behind, just as its broad scorched surfaces began everywhere to shake off the mist,—and entered one of the bordering woods.

She had a basket on her arm, and when she had found for herself a mossy seat amid the roots of a great oak, she unpacked it. It contained a mass of written pages, some fresh scribbling paper, ink and pens, and a small portfolio. When they were all lying on the moss beside her, Kitty turned over the sheets with a loving hand, reading here and there.

'It is good!' she said to herself. 'I vow it is!

Dipping her pen in the ink, she began upon corrections. The sun filtered through the thick leafage overhead, touching her white dress, her small shoes, and the masses of her hair. She wore a Leghorn garden-hat, tied with pink ribbons under her chin, and in her morning freshness and daintiness she looked about seventeen. The hours of sleep had calmed the restlessness of the wide brown eyes; they were full now of gentleness and mirth.

'I wonder if he'll come?'

She looked up and listened. And as she did so, her eyes and sense were seized with the beauty of the wood. The mystery of early solitary hours seemed to be still upon it; both in the sunlight and the shadow there was a magic unknown to the later day. In a clearing before her spread a lake of willow-herb, of a pure bright pink, hemmed in by a golden shore of rag-wort. The splash of colour gave Kitty a passionate delight.

'Dear, dear world!' she stretched out her hands to it in a childish greeting.

Then the joy died sharply from her eyes. 'How many years left—to enjoy it in—before one dies?—or one's heart dies?'

Invariably now, her moments of sensuous pleasure

ended in this dread of something beyond,—of a sudden drowning of beauty and delight,—of a future unknown and cruel, coming to meet her, like some armed assassin in a narrow path.

William!—when it came, could William save her? 'William is a *darling*!' she said to herself, her face full of yearning.

As for that other,—it gave her an intense pleasure to think of the flames creeping up the form and face of the photograph. Should she hear perhaps in a week or two that he had been seized with some mysterious illness, like the witch-victims of old? A shiver ran through her, a thrill of repentance,—till the bitter lines of the poem came back to memory,—lines describing a woman with neither the courage for sin nor the strength for virtue, a 'light woman' indeed, whom the great passions passed eternally by, whom it was a humiliation to court, and a mere weakness to regret. Then she laughed; and began again with passionate zest upon the sheets before her.

A sound of approaching footsteps on the wood path. She half rose, smiling.

The branches parted, and Darrell appeared. He paused to survey the Oread vision of Lady Kitty.

'Am I not to the minute?' He held up his watch in front of her.

'So you got my note?'

'Certainly. I was immensely flattered.' He threw himself down on the moss beside her, his sallow long-chinned face and dark eyes toned to a morning cheerfulness, his dress much fresher and more exact than usual. 'But he is one of the men who look so much better in their old clothes!' thought Kitty.

'Well, what can I do for you, Lady Kitty?' he resumed, smiling.

'I wanted your advice,' said Kitty,—not altogether

sure, now that he was there beside her, that she did want it.

'About your literary work?'

She threw him a quick glance.

'Do you know? How do you know? I have been writing a book!'

'So I imagined——'

'And—and—' She broke now into eagerness, bending forward, 'I want you to help me get it published. It is a deadly secret. Nobody knows——'

'Not even William?'

'No one,' she repeated. 'And I can't tell you about it, or show you a line of it, unless you vow and swear to me——'

'Oh! I swear'—said Darrell, tranquilly; 'I swear.'

Kitty looked at him doubtfully a moment,—then resumed—

'I have written it at all sorts of times—when William was away—in the middle of the night—out in the woods. *Nobody* knows. You see'—her little fingers plucked at the moss—'I have a good many advantages. If people want "Society" with a big S, I can give it them!'

'Naturally,' said Darrell.

'And it always amuses people—doesn't it?'

Kitty clasped her hands round her knees and looked at him with candour.

'Does it?' said Darrell. 'It has been done a good deal.'

'Oh of course,' said Kitty impatiently, 'mine's not the proper thing. You don't imagine I should try and write like Thackeray, do you? Mine's *real* people,—*real* things that happened,—with just the names altered.'

'Ah!'—said Darrell, sitting up,—'that sounds exciting. Is it libellous?'

'Well, that's just what I want to know,' said Kitty

slowly. 'Of course, I've made a kind of story out of it. But you'd have to be a great fool not to guess. I've put myself in, and——'

'And Ashe?'

Kitty nodded. 'All the novels that are written about politics nowadays—except Dizzy's—are such nonsense, aren't they? I just wanted to describe—from the inside—how a real statesman'—she threw up her head proudly—'lives, and what he does.'

'Excellent subject,' said Darrell. 'Well—anybody else?'

Kitty flushed. 'You'll see,'— she said uncertainly.

Darrell's involuntary smile was hidden by a bunch of honeysuckle at which he was sniffing. 'May I look?' he asked stretching out a hand for the sheets.

She pushed them towards him, half unwilling, half eager; and he began to turn them over. Apparently it had a thread of story,—both slender and extravagant. And on the thread——Hullo!—here was the Fancy Ball; he pounced upon it. A portrait of Lady Parham,—Ye powers! he chuckled as he read. On the next page the Chancellor of the Exchequer,—snub-nosed *parvenu* and Puritan—admirably caught. Further on a speech of Ashe's in the House,—with caricature to right and caricature to left. . . . Ah! the poet!—at last! He bent over the page, till Kitty coughed and fidgeted, and he thought it best to hurry on. But it was war, he perceived—open, undignified, feminine war. On the next page, the Archbishop of Canterbury,—with Lady Kitty's views on the Athanasian Creed! Heavens! what a book! Next Royalty itself, not too respectfully handled. Then Ashe again,—Ashe glorified, Ashe explained, Ashe intrigued against, and Ashe triumphant,—everywhere the centre of the stage, and everywhere of course, all unknown to the author, the fool of the piece. Political indiscretions also,

of the most startling kind, as coming from the wife of a Cabinet Minister. Allusions besides, scattered broadcast, to the scandals of the day,—material as far as he could see for a dozen libel-actions. And with it all, much fantastic ability, flashes of wit and romance, enough to give the book wings beyond its first personal audience,—enough in fact to secure to all its scandalous matter the widest possible chance of fame.

'Well!——'

He rolled over on his elbows, and lay staring at the sheets before him—dumb. What was he to say?

A thought struck him. As far as he could perceive, there was an empty niche.

'And Lord Parham?'

A smile of mischief broadened on Kitty's lips.

'That'll come,'—she said,—and checked herself. Darrell bowed his face on his hands and laughed, unseen. To what sacrificial rite was the unconscious victim hurrying—at that very moment—in the express train which was to land him at Haggart Station that afternoon?

'Well!' said Kitty impatiently—'what do you think? Can you help me?'

Darrell looked up.

'You know, Lady Kitty, that book can't be published like that. Nobody would risk it.'

'Well, I suppose they'll tell me what to cut out.'

'Yes'—said Darrell, slowly, caught by many reflections,—'no doubt some clever fellow will know how near the wind it's possible to sail. But any way, trim it as you like, the book will make a scandal.'

'Will it?' Kitty's eyes flashed. She sat up radiant, her breath quick and defiant.

'I don't see,'—he resumed—'how you can publish it without consulting Ashe.'

Kitty gave a cry of protest.

'No, no, *no*! Of course he'd disapprove. But then —he soon forgives a thing, if he thinks it clever. And it is clever, isn't it?—some of it. He'd laugh,—and then it would be all right. *He'd* never pay out his enemies, but he couldn't help enjoying it if someone else did,—could he?' She pleaded like a child.

'"No need to forgive them,"'—murmured Darrell, as he rolled over on his back, and put his hat over his eyes,—'for you would have "shot them all."'

Under the shelter of his hat he tried to think himself clear. What *really* were her motives? Partly no doubt a childish love of excitement?—partly revenge? The animus against the Parhams was clear in every page. Cliffe too came badly out of it,—a fantastic Byronic mixture of libertine and cad. Lady Kitty had better beware! As far as he knew, Cliffe had never yet been struck, with impunity to the striker.

If these precious sheets ever appeared, Ashe's position would certainly be shaken. Poor wretch!—endeavouring to pursue a serious existence, yoked to such an impish sprite as this! His own fault, after all. That first night, at Madame d'Estrees', was not her madness written in her eyes?

'Now tell me, Lady Kitty,'—he roused himself to look at her with some attention,—'what do you want me to do?'

'To find me a publisher, and—' she stooped towards him with a laughing shyness,—'to get me some money.'

'Money!'

'I've been so awfully extravagant lately,' said Kitty frankly. 'Something really will have to be done. And the book's worth some money, isn't it?'

'A good deal,' said Darrell. Then he added, with emphasis—'I really can't be responsible for it in any way, Lady Kitty.'

'Of course not. I will never, *never* say I told you! But you see I'm not literary,—I don't know in the least how to set about it. If you would just put me in communication?'

Darrell pondered. None of the well-known publishers of course would look at it. But there were plenty of people who would,—and give Lady Kitty a large sum of money for it too.

What part, however, could he—Darrell—play in such a transaction?

'I am bound to warn you'—he said at last, looking up—'that your husband will probably strongly disapprove this book, and that it may do him harm.'

Kitty bit her lip.

'But if I tell nobody who wrote it—and you tell nobody?'—

'Ashe would know at once. Everybody would know.'

'William would know,'—his companion admitted, unwillingly. 'But I don't see why anybody else should. You see I've put myself in—I've said the most shocking things!'——

Darrell replied that she would not find that device of much service to her.

'However,—I can, no doubt, get an opinion for you.'

Kitty, all delight, thanked him profusely.

'You shall have the whole of it before you go—Friday, isn't it?' she said, eagerly gathering it up.

Darrell was certainly conscious of no desire to burden himself with the horrid thing. But he was rarely able to refuse the request of a pretty and fashionable woman, and it flattered his conceit to be the sole recipient of what might very well turn out to be a political secret of some importance. Not that he meant to lay himself open

to any just reproach whatever in the matter. He would show it to some fitting person—to pacify Lady Kitty,—write a letter of strong protest to her afterwards—and wash his hands of it. What might happen then was not his business.

Meanwhile his inner mind was full of an acrid debate which turned entirely upon his interview with Ashe of the day before. No doubt, as an old friend, aware of Lady Kitty's excitable character, he might have felt it his duty to go straight to Ashe, *coûte que coûte*, and warn him of what was going on. But what encouragement had been given him to play so Quixotic a part? Why should he take any particular thought for Ashe's domestic peace, or Ashe's public place? What consideration had Ashe shown for *him*? 'Tu l'as voulu, Georges Dandin!'

So it ended in his promising to take the MS. to London with him, and let Lady Kitty know the result of his inquiries. Kitty's dancing step as they returned to the house betrayed the height of her spirits.

A rumour flew round the house towards the middle of the day that Harry the little heir was worse. Kitty did not appear at luncheon, and the doctor was sent for. Before he came, it was known only to Margaret French that Kitty had escaped by herself from the house and could not be found. Ashe and Lady Tranmore saw the doctor, who prescribed, and would not admit that there was any cause for alarm. The heat had tried the child, and Lady Kitty—he looked round the nursery for her in some perplexity—might be quite reassured.

Margaret found her, wandering in the park,—very wild and pale,—told her the doctor's verdict and brought her home. Kitty said little or nothing, and was presently persuaded to change her dress for Lord Parham's arrival. By the time the operation was over, she was full

as usual of smiles and chatter, with no trace apparently of the mood which had gone before.

Lord Parham found the house-party assembled on the lawn, with Kitty in a three-cornered hat, fantastically garnished at the side with a great plume of white cock's feathers, presiding at the tea-table.

'Ah!' thought the Premier, as he approached—'now for the tare in Ashe's wheat!'

Nothing, however, could have been more gracious than Kitty's reception of him, or more effusive than his response. He took his seat beside her, a solid and impressive figure, no less closely observed by such of the habitual guests of the political country houses as happened to be present, than by the sprinkling of local clergy and country neighbours to whom Kitty was giving tea. Lord Parham, though now in the fourth year of his Premiership, was still something of a mystery to his countrymen; while for the inner circle it was an amusement and an event that he should be seen without his wife.

For some time all went well. Kitty's manners and topics were alike beyond reproach. When presently she inquired politely as to the success of his Scottish tour, Lord Parham hoped he had not altogether disgraced himself. But, thank Heaven, it was done. Meanwhile Ashe he supposed had been enjoying the pursuits of a scholar and a gentleman?—lucky fellow!

'He has been reading the Bible,'—said Kitty carelessly, as she handed cake,—'Just now he's in the Acts. That's why, I suppose, he didn't hear the carriage. John!' she called a footman. 'Tell Mr. Ashe that Lord Parham has arrived!'

The Premier opened astonished eyes.

'Does Ashe generally study the Scriptures of an afternoon?'

Kitty nodded,—with her most confiding smile. 'When

he can. He says'—she dropped her voice to a theatrical whisper,—'the Bible is such a "d——d interesting book!"'

Lord Parham started in his seat. Ashe and some of his friends still faintly recalled, in their too familiar and public use of this particular naughty word, the lurid vocabulary of the Peel and Melbourne generation. But in a lady's mouth, the effect was prodigious. Lord Grosville frowned sternly and walked away; Eddie Helston smothered a burst of laughter; the Dean, startled, broke off a conversation with a group of archæological clergymen and came to see what he could do to keep Lady Kitty in order; while Lady Tranmore flushed deeply, and began a hasty conversation with Lady Edith Manley. Meanwhile Kitty, quite unconscious, 'went on cutting'—or rather, dispensing 'bread and butter'; and Lord Parham changed the subject.

'What a charming house!' he said, unwarily, waving his hand towards the Haggart mansion. He was short-sighted, and, in truth, saw only that it was big.

Kitty looked at him in wonder,—a friendly and amiable wonder. She said it was very kind of him to try and spare her feelings, but really anybody might say what they liked of Haggart. She and William weren't responsible.

Lord Parham, rather nettled, put on his eye-glass, and being an obstinate man, still maintained that he saw no reason at all to be dissatisfied with Haggart, from the æsthetic point of view. Kitty said nothing, but for the first time a gleam of mockery showed itself in her changing look.

Lady Tranmore, always nervously on the watch, moved forward at this point, and Lord Parham with marked and pompous suavity transferred his conversation to her.

Thus assured, as he thought, of a good listener, and

delivered from his uncomfortable hostess, Lord Parham crossed his legs and began to talk at his ease. The guests round the various tea-tables converged, some standing and some sitting, and made a circle about the great man. About Kitty, too, who sat, equally conspicuous, dipping a biscuit in milk, and teasing her small dog with it. Lord Parham meanwhile described to Lady Tranmore—at wearisome length—the demonstrations which had attended his journey south, the railway station crowds, addresses and so forth. He handled the topic in a tone of jocular humility, which but slightly concealed the vast complacency beneath. Kitty's lip twitched; she fed Ponto hastily with all possible cakes.

'No one of course can keep any count of what he says on these occasions'—resumed Lord Parham, with a gracious smile.—'I hope I talked some sense——

'Oh, but why?' said Kitty, looking up, her large fawn's eyes bent on the speaker.

'Why?' repeated Lord Parham, suddenly stiffening. I don't follow you, Lady Kitty.'

'Anybody can talk sense!' said Kitty, throwing a big bit of muffin at Ponto's nose. 'It's the other thing that's hard—isn't it?'

'Lady Kitty!' said the Dean lifting a finger, 'you are plagiarising from Mr. Pitt.'

'Am I?' said Kitty. 'I didn't know.'

'I imagine that Mr. Pitt talked sense sometimes,' said Lord Parham shortly.

'Ah, that was when he was drunk!' said Kitty. 'Then he wasn't responsible.'

Lord Parham and the circle laughed,—though the Premier's laugh was a little dry and perfunctory.

'So you worship nonsense, Lady Kitty?'

Kitty nodded sweetly.

'And so does William. Ah, here he is!'

For Ashe appeared, hurrying over the lawn and Lord Parham rose to greet his host.

'Upon my word, Ashe, how well you look! *You* have had some holiday!'

'Which is more than can be said of yourself,' said Ashe, with smiling sympathy. 'Well!—how have the speeches gone? Is there anything left of you? Edinburgh was magnificent!'

He wore his most radiant aspect, as he sat down beside his guest; and Kitty watching him, and already conscious of a renewed and excitable dislike for her guest, thought William was overdoing it absurdly, and grew still more restive.

The Premier brought the tips of his fingers lightly together, as he resumed his seat.

'Oh! my dear fellow, people were very kind—too much so! Yes—I think it did good—it did good. I should now rest and be thankful—if it weren't for the Bishops!'

'The Bishops!' said the Rector of the parish standing near. 'What have the Bishops been doing, my Lord?'

'Dying,' said Kitty, as she fell into an attitude which commanded both William and Lord Parham. 'They do it on purpose.'

'Another this morning!' said Ashe, throwing up his hands.

'Oh! they die to plague me,' said the Prime Minister, with the air of one on whom the universe weighs heavy. 'There never was such a conspiracy!'

'You should let William appoint them!' said Kitty, leaning her chin upon her hands, and studying Lord Parham with eyes all the more brilliant for the dark circles which fatigue, or something else, had drawn round them.

'Ah to be sure!'—said Lord Parham, affably; 'I had forgotten that Ashe was our theologian. Take me a walk before dinner!' he added, addressing his host.

'But you won't take his advice,' said Kitty smiling.

The Premier turned rather sharply.

'How do you know that, Lady Kitty?'

Kitty hesitated,—then said with the prettiest, slightest laugh—

'Lady Parham has such strong views—hasn't she?—on Church questions?'

Lord Parham's feeling was that a more insidiously impertinent question had never been put to him. He drew himself up.

'If she has, Lady Kitty, I can only say I know very little about them! She very wisely keeps them to herself.'

'Ah!' said Kitty, as her lovely eyebrows lifted, 'that shows how little people know.'

'I don't quite understand,' said Lord Parham. 'To what do you allude, Lady Kitty?'

Kitty laughed. She raised her eyes to the Rector, a spare High Churchman, who had retreated uncomfortably behind Lady Tranmore.

'Someone—said to me last week—that Lady Parham had saved the Church!'

The Prime Minister rose. 'I must have a little exercise before dinner. Your gardens, Ashe?—is there time?'

Ashe, scarlet with discomfort and annoyance, carried his visitor off. As he did so, he passed his wife. Kitty turned her little head, looked at him half shyly, half defiantly. The Dean saw the look; saw also that Ashe deliberately avoided it.

The party presently began to disperse. The Dean found himself beside his hostess—strolling over the lawn towards the house. He observed her attentively,—vexed

with her, and vexed for her! Surely she was thinner than he had ever seen her. A little more, and her beauty would suffer seriously. Coming he knew not whence, there lit upon him the sudden and painful impression of something undermined, something consumed from within.

'Lady Kitty, do you ever rest?' he asked her unexpectedly.

'Rest!' she laughed. 'Why should I?'

'Because you are wearing yourself out.'

She shrugged her shoulders.

'Do you ever lie down—alone—and read a book?' persisted the Dean.

'Yes. I have just finished Renan's *Vie de Jésus*!'

Her glance, even with him, kept its note of audacity but much softened by a kind of wistfulness.

'Ah! my dear Lady Kitty, let Renan alone,' cried the Dean—then with a change of tone—'but are you speaking truth—or naughtiness?'

'Truth'—said Kitty. 'But—of course—I am in a temper.'

The Dean laughed.

'I see Lord Parham is not a favourite of yours.'

Kitty compressed her small lips.

'To think that William should have to take his orders from that man!'—she said, under her breath.

'Bear it—for William's sake,' said the Dean softly, 'and meanwhile—take my advice—and don't read any more Renan!'

Kitty looked at him curiously.

'I prefer to see things as they are.'

The Dean sighed.

'That none of us can do, my dear Lady Kitty. No one can satisfy his *intelligence*. But religion speaks to the *will*,—and it is the only thing between us and the void. Don't tamper with it! It is soon gone.'

A satirical expression passed over the face of his companion.

'Mine was gone before we had been a month married. William killed it.'

The Dean exclaimed.

'I hear always of his interest in religious matters!'

'He cares for nothing so much,—and he doesn't believe one single word of anything! I was brought up in a convent, you know,—but William laughed it all out of me.'

'Dear Lady Kitty!'

Kitty nodded. 'And now, of course, I know there's nothing in it. Oh! I *do* beg your pardon!' she said, eagerly. 'I never meant to say anything rude to *you*. And I must go!' She looked up at an open window on the second floor of the house. The Dean supposed it was the nursery, and began to ask after the boy. But before he could frame his question, she was gone, flying over the grass with a foot that scarcely seemed to touch it.

'Poor child, poor child!' murmured the Dean, in a most genuine distress. But it was not the boy he was thinking of.

Presently, however, he was overtaken by Miss French, of whom he inquired how the baby was.

Margaret hesitated. 'He seems to lose strength,' she said, sadly. 'The doctor declares there is no danger, unless——'

'Unless what?'

'Oh! but it's so unlikely!' was her hasty reply. 'Don't let's think of it.'

Kitty was just giving a last look at herself in the large mirror which lined half one of the sides of her room, when Ashe invaded her. She glanced at him askance a

little, and when the maid had gone Kitty hurriedly gathered up gloves and fan and prepared to follow her.

'Kitty—one word!'

He caught her in his arm, and held her while he looked down upon her sparkling dress, and half-reluctant face. 'Kitty, do be nice to that old fellow to-night! It's only for two nights. Take him in the right way, and make a conquest of him—for good. He's been very decent to me in our walk,—though you did say such extraordinary things to him this afternoon. I believe he really wants to make amends.'

'I do hate his white eyelashes so,' said Kitty slowly.

'What does it matter,' cried Ashe, angrily—'whether he were a blue-faced baboon!—for two nights? Just listen to him a little, Kitty,—that's all he wants. And—don't be offended!—but hold your own small tongue—just a little!'

Kitty pulled herself away.

'I believe I shall do something dreadful,' she said, quietly.

A sternness to which Ashe's good-humoured face was almost wholly strange, showed itself in his expression.

'Why should you do anything dreadful, please? Lord Parham is your guest, and my political chief. Is there any woman in England who would not do her best to be civil to him under the circumstances?'

'I suppose not,' said Kitty with deliberation. 'No, I don't think there can be.'

'Kitty!'

For the first time Ashe was conscious of real exasperation. What was to be done with a temperament and a disposition like this?

'Do you never think that you have it in your power to help me or to ruin me?' he said, with vehemence.

'Oh yes—often. I mean—to help you—in my own way.'

Ashe's laugh was a sound of pure annoyance.

'But please understand, it would be *infinitely* better if you would help me, in *my* way—in the natural accepted way—the way that everybody understands.'

'—The way Lord Parham recommends?' Kitty looked at him quietly. 'Never mind, William. I *am* trying to help you.'

Her eyes shone with the strangest glitter. Ashe was conscious of another of those sudden stabs of anxiety about her which he had felt at intervals through the preceding year. His face softened.

'Dear, don't let's talk nonsense! Just look at me sometimes at dinner, and say to yourself, "William asks me—for his sake—to be nice to Lord Parham."'

He again drew her to him, but she repulsed him almost with violence.

'Why is he here? Why have we people dining? We ought to be alone—in the dark!'

Her face had become a white mask. Her breast rose and fell, as though she fought with sobs.

'Kitty—what do you mean?' He recoiled in dismay.

'Harry!'—she just breathed the word between her closed lips.

'My darling!'—cried Ashe, 'I saw Dr. Rotherham myself this afternoon. He gave the most satisfactory account, and Margaret told me she had repeated everything to you. The child will soon be himself again.'

'He is *dying*!' said Kitty in the same low, remote voice, her gaze still fixed on Ashe.

'Kitty! Don't say such things—don't think them!' Ashe had himself grown pale. 'At any rate'—he turned on her reproachfully—'tell me *why* you think them. Confide in me, Kitty. Come and talk to me about the boy. But three-fourths of the time you behave as though

there were nothing the matter with him—you won't even see the doctor—and then you say a thing like this!'—

She was silent a moment; then, with a wild gesture of the head and shoulders as of one shaking off a weight, she moved away,—drew on her long gloves,—and, going to the dressing-table, gave a touch of rouge to her cheeks.

'Kitty, why did you say that?' Ashe followed her entreatingly.

'I don't know. At least I couldn't explain. Now shall we go down?'

Ashe drew a long breath. His frail son held the inmost depths of his heart.

'You have made the party an abomination to me!' he said with energy.

'Don't believe me then—believe the doctor,' said Kitty, her face changing. 'And as for Lord Parham, I'll try, William,—I'll try.'

She passed him,—the loveliest of visions—flung him a hand to kiss—and was gone.

CHAPTER XVI

THERE could be no question that in all external matters Lord Parham was that evening magnificently entertained by the Home Secretary and Lady Kitty Ashe. The chef was extravagantly good; the wines, flowers, and service lavish to a degree which made both Ashe and Lady Tranmore secretly uncomfortable. Lady Tranmore in particular detested 'show,' influenced as much by aristocratic instinct as by moral qualms; and there was to her mind a touch of vulgarity in the entertaining at Haggart, which might be tolerated in the case of financiers and *nouveaux riches*, while, as connected with her William and his wife, who had no need whatever to bribe society, it was unbecoming and undignified. Moreover, the winter had been marked by a financial crisis caused entirely by Kitty's extravagance. A large sum of money had had to be raised from the Tranmore estates; times were not good for the landed interest, and the head-agent had begun to look grave.

If only William would control his wife! But Haggart contained one of those fine slowly-gathered libraries which make the distinction of so many English country-houses; and in the intervals of his official work, which even in holiday time was considerable, Ashe could not be beguiled from the beloved company of his books to help Kitty sign cheques, or scold her about expenditure.

So Kitty signed and signed; and the smaller was

Ashe's balance, the more, it seemed, did Kitty spend. Then, of course, every few months, there were deficits which had to be made good. And as to the debts which accumulated, Lady Tranmore preferred not to think about them. It all meant future trouble and clipping of wings for William; and it all entered into that deep and hidden resentment, half anxious love, half alien temperament, which Elizabeth Tranmore felt towards Ashe's wife.

However,—to repeat,—Lord Parham, as far as the fleshpots went, was finely treated. Kitty was in full force, glittering in a spangled dress, her dazzling face and neck, and the piled masses of her hair, thrown out in relief against the panelled walls of the dining-room, with a brilliance which might have tempted a modern Rembrandt to paint an English Saskia. Eddie Helston, on her left, could not take his eyes from her. And even Lord Parham, much as he disliked her, acknowledged, during the early courses, that she was handsome, and in her own way—Thank God! it was not the way of any womankind belonging to him—good company.

He saw too, or thought he saw, that she was anxious to make him amends for her behaviour of the afternoon. She restrained herself, and talked politics. And within the lines he always observed when talking to women, lines dictated by a contempt innate and ineradicable, Lord Parham was quite ready to talk politics too. Then—it suddenly struck him that she was pumping him, and with great adroitness. Ashe, he knew, wanted an early place in the Session for a particular measure in which he was interested. Lord Parham had no mind to give him the precedence that he wanted; was in fact determined on something quite different. But he was well aware by now that Ashe was a person to be reckoned with; and he had so far taken refuge in vagueness. An amiable vague-

ness; by which Ashe, on their walk before dinner, had been much taken in, misled no doubt by the strength of his own wishes.

And now here was Lady Kitty—whom by the way it was not at all easy to take in—trying to 'manage' him, to pin him to details, to wheedle him out of a pledge!—

Lord Parham, presently, looked at her with cold, smiling eyes.

'Ah! you are interested in these things, Lady Kitty? Well,—tell me your views. You women have such an instinct——'

—whereby the moth was kept hovering round the flame. Till, in a flash, Kitty awoke to the fact that while she had been listening happily to her own voice, taking no notice whatever of the signals which William endeavoured to send her from the other end of the table,—while she had been tripping gaily through one indiscretion after another, betraying innumerable things as to William's opinions and William's plans that she had infinitely better not have betrayed, Lord Parham had said nothing—betrayed nothing—promised nothing. A quiet smile—a courteous nod—and presently a shade of mockery in the lips—the meaning of them, all in a moment, burst on Kitty.

Her face flamed. Thenceforward it would be difficult to describe the dinner. Conversationally, at Kitty's end it became an uproar. She started the wildest topics, and Lord Parham had afterwards a bruised recollection as of one who has been dragged or driven, Caliban-like, through brake and thicket, pinched and teased and pelted by elfish fingers, without one single uncivil speech, or act of overt offence to which an angry guest could point. With each later course, the Prime Minister grew stiffer and more silent. Endurance was written in every line of his fighting head and round ungraceful shoulders,

in his veiled eyes, and stolid mouth. Lady Tranmore gave a gasp of relief when at last Kitty rose from her seat.

The evening went no better. Lord Parham was set down to cards with Kitty, Eddie Helston, and Lord Grosville. Lord Grosville, his partner, played, to the Premier's thinking, like an idiot, and Lady Kitty and the young man chattered and sparred, so that all reasonable play became impossible. Lord Parham lost more than he at all liked to lose, and at half-past ten, he pleaded fatigue, refused to smoke, and went to his room.

Ashe was perfectly aware of the failure of the evening, and the discomfort of his guest. But he said nothing and Kitty avoided his neighbourhood. Meanwhile between him and his mother a certain tacit understanding began to make itself felt. They talked quietly, in corners, of the arrangements for the speech and fête of the morrow. So far, they had been too much left to Kitty. Ashe promised his mother to look into them. He and she combined for the protection of Lord Parham.

When about one o'clock Ashe went to bed, Kitty either was or pretended to be fast asleep. The room was in darkness save for the faint illumination of a night-light, which just revealed to Ashe the delicate figure of his wife, lying high on her pillows, her cheek and brow hidden in the confusion of her hair.

One window was wide open to the night, and once more Ashe stood lost in 'recollection' beside it, as on that night in Hill Street, more than a year before. But the thoughts which on that former occasion had been still as tragic and unfamiliar guests in a mind that repelled them had now, alack, lost their strangeness; they entered habitually, unannounced,—frequent, irritating, deplorable.

Had the relation between himself and Kitty ever, in truth, recovered the shock of that incident on the river—of his night of restlessness, his morning of agonised alarm,—and the story to which he listened on her return? It had been like some physical blow or wound, easily healed or conquered for the moment, which then, as time goes on, reveals a hidden series of consequences.

Consequences, in this case, connected above all with Kitty's own nature and temperament. The excitement of Cliffe's declaration, of her own resistance, and dramatic position, as between her husband and her lover, had worked ever since as a poison in Kitty's mind,—Ashe was becoming dismally certain of it. The absurd incident of the night before with the photograph, had been enough to prove it.

Well, the thing, he supposed, would right itself in time. Meanwhile, Cliffe had been dismissed, and this foolish young fellow Eddie Helston must soon follow him. Ashe had viewed the affair so far with an amused tolerance; if Kitty liked to flirt with babes it was her affair, not his. But he perceived that his mother was once more becoming restless under the general *inconvenance* of it; and he had noticed distress and disapproval in the little Dean, Kitty's staunchest friend.

Luckily, no difficulty there! The lad was almost as devoted to him—Ashe—as he was to Kitty. He was absurd, affected, vain; but there was no vice in him, and a word of remonstrance would probably reduce him to abject regret, and self-reproach. Ashe intended that his mother should speak it, and as he made up his mind to ask her help, he felt for the second time the sharp humiliation of the husband who cannot secure his own domestic peace, but must depend on the aid of others. Yet how could he himself go to young Helston? Some men, no doubt, could have handled such an incident

with dignity. Ashe with his critical sense for ever playing on himself and others; with the touch of moral shirking that belonged to his inmost nature; and above all with his half-humorous half-bitter consciousness that whoever else might be a hero, he was none: Ashe, at least, could and would do nothing of the sort. That he should begin now to play the tyrannous or jealous husband would make him ridiculous both in his own eyes and other people's.

And yet Kitty must somehow be protected from herself! . . . Then—as to politics? Once, in talking with his mother, he had said to her that he was Kitty's husband first, and a public man afterwards. Was he prepared now to make the statement, with the same simplicity, the same whole-heartedness?

Involuntarily he moved closer to the bed, and looked down on Kitty. Little delicate face!—always with something mournful and fretful in repose.

He loved her surely as much as ever—ah! yes he loved her. His whole nature yearned over her, as the wife of his youth, the mother of his poor boy. Yet, as he remembered the mood in which he had proposed to her, that defiance of the world and life which had possessed him when he had made her marry him, he felt himself—almost with bitterness—another and a meaner man. No!—he was *not* prepared to lose the world for her,—the world of high influence and ambition upon which he had now entered as a conqueror. She *must* so control herself that she did not ruin all his hopes,—which after all were hers,—and the work that he might do for his country.

What incredible perversity and caprice she had shown towards Lord Parham! How was he to deal with it?—he, William Ashe, with his ironic temper, and his easy standards? What could he say to her, but 'Love me, Kitty!—love yourself!—and don't be a little fool! Life

might be so amusing,—if you would only bridle your fancies, and play the game!'

As for loftier things, 'self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,'—Duty—and the passion of high ideals—who was he to prate about them? The little Dean, perhaps!—most spiritual of worldlings. Ashe knew himself to be neither spiritual, nor a hypocrite. A certain measure, a certain order and harmony in life,—laughter, and good humour, and affection,—and, for the fight that makes and welds a man, those great political and social interests in the midst of which he found himself—he asked no more, and with these he would have been abundantly content.

He sighed and frowned; his muscles stiffening unconsciously. Yes, for both their sakes, he must try and play the master with Kitty, ridiculous as it seemed.

. . . He turned away, remembering his sick child,—and went noiselessly to the nursery. There along the darkened passages he found a night-nurse, sitting working beside a shaded lamp. The child was sleeping, and the report was good. Ashe stole on tip-toe to look at him, holding his breath, then returned to his dressing-room. But a faint call from Kitty pursued him. He opened the door, and saw her sitting up in bed.

'How is he?'

She was hardly awake, but her expression struck him as very wild and piteous. He went to her and took her in his arms.

'Sleeping quietly, darling,—so must you!'

She sank back on her pillows, his arm still round her.

'I was there an hour ago—' she murmured—'I shall soon wake up——'

But for the moment she was asleep again, her fair head lying against his shoulder. He sat down beside her, supporting her. Suddenly, as he looked down upon her

with mingled passion, tenderness, and pain, a sharp perception assailed him. How thin she was!—a mere feather's weight! The face was smaller than ever,—the hands skin and bone! Margaret French had once or twice bade him notice this, had spoken with anxiety. He bent over his wife and observed her attentively. It was merely the effect of a hot summer, surely,—and of a constant nervous fatigue? He would take her abroad for a fortnight in September, if his official work would let him, and perhaps leave her in North Italy, or Switzerland, with Margaret French?

The great day was half-way through, and the throng in Haggart Park and grounds was at its height. A flower-show in the morning; then a tenants' dinner with a speech from Ashe; and now in a marquee erected for the occasion, Lord Parham was addressing his supporters in the county. Around him on the platform sat the Whig gentry, the Radical manufacturers, the town wire-pullers and local agents on whom a great party depended; in front of him stretched a crowded meeting drawn in almost equal parts from the coal-mining districts to the north of Haggart and from the agricultural districts to the south....

The August air was stifling; perspiration shone on the broad brows and cheeks of the farmers sitting in the front half of the audience; Lord Parham's grey face was almost white; his harsh voice laboured against the acoustic difficulties of the tent; effort and heat, discomfort and ennui breathed from the packed benches, and from the short-necked large-headed figure of the Premier.

Ashe sat to the speaker's right, outwardly attentive, inwardly ashamed of his party, and his chief. He himself belonged to a new generation, for whom formulæ that had satisfied their fathers were empty and dead. But

with these formulæ Lord Parham was stuffed. A man of average intriguing ability, he had been raised, at a moment of transition, to the place he held, by a consummate command of all the meaner arts of compromise and management, no less than by an invaluable power of playing to the gallery. He led a party who despised him,—and he complacently imagined that he was the party. His speech on this occasion bristled with himself; and had in truth no other substance; the I's swarmed out upon the audience like wasps.

Ashe groaned in spirit, 'We have the ideas,' he thought,—'but they are damned little good to us!—it is the Tories who have the men! Ye Gods!—must we all talk like this at last?' . . .

Suddenly, on the other side of the platform, behind Lord Parham, he noticed that Kitty and Eddie Helston were exchanging signs. Kitty drew out a tablet, wrote upon it, and leaning over some white-frocked children of the Lord Lieutenant who sat behind her, handed the torn leaf to Helston. But from some clumsiness he let it drop; at the moment a door opened at the back of the platform, and the leaf caught by the draught was blown back across the bench where Kitty and the house-party were sitting, and fluttered down to a resting-place on the piece of red baize whereon Lord Parham was standing—close beside his left foot.

Ashe saw Kitty's start of dismay, her scarlet flush, her involuntary movement. But Lord Parham had started on his peroration. The rustics gaped, the gentry sat expressionless, the reporters toiled after the great man. Kitty all the time kept her eyes fixed on the little white paper; Ashe no less. Between him and Lord Parham there was first the Lord Lieutenant, a portly man, very blind and extremely deaf,—then a table, with a Liberal peer behind it for chairman.

Lord Parham had resumed his seat. The tent was shaken with cheers, and the smiling chairman had risen.

'Can you ask Lord Parham to hand me on that paper on the floor?' said Ashe in the ear of the Lord Lieutenant, —'it seems to have dropped from my portfolio.'

The Lord Lieutenant, bending backward behind the chairman, as the next speaker rose, tried to attract Lord Parham's attention. Eddie Helston was, at the same time, endeavouring to make his way forward through the crowded seats behind the Prime Minister.

Meanwhile Lord Parham had perceived the paper, raised it and adjusted his spectacles. He thought it was a communication from the audience,—a question perhaps, that he was expected to answer.

'Lord Parham!' cried the Lord Lieutenant again, 'would you——'

'Silence, please!—Speak up!'—from the audience, who had so far failed to catch a word of what the new speaker was saying.

'What *is* the matter? You really can't get through here!' said a grey-haired dowager crossly to Eddie Helston.

Lord Parham looked at the paper in mystification. It contained these words—

'Hope you've been counting the "I's." I make it fifty-seven.——K.'

—and in the corner of the paper a thumb-nail sketch of himself, perorating, with a garland of capital I's round his neck.

The Premier's face became brick-red, then grey again. He folded up the paper, and put it in his waistcoat pocket.

The meeting had broken up. For the common herd, it was to be followed by sports in the park, and refresh-

ments in big tents. For the gentry, Lady Kitty had a garden party to which Royalty was coming. And as her guests streamed out of the marquee, Lord Parham approached his hostess.

'I think this belongs to you, Lady Kitty.' And taking from his pocket a folded slip of paper he offered it to her.

Kitty looked at him. Her colour was high, her eyes sparkled—

'Nothing to do with me!' she said gaily, as she glanced at it. 'But I'll look for the owner.'

'Sorry to give you the trouble,' said Lord Parham, with a ceremonious inclination. Then, turning to Ashe, he remarked that he was extremely tired—worn out, in fact—and would ask his host's leave to desert the garden party while he attended to some most important letters. Ashe offered to escort him to the house. 'On the contrary, look after your guests,' said the Premier drily, and beckoning to the Liberal peer who had been his chairman, he engaged him in conversation, and the two presently vanished through a window open to the terrace.

Kitty had been joined meanwhile by Eddie Helston, and the two stood talking together, a flushed, excited pair. Ashe overtook them.

'May I speak to you a moment, Kitty?'

Eddie Helston glanced at the fine form and stiffened bearing of his host, understood that his presence counted for something in the annoyance of Ashe's expression, and departed abashed.

'I should like to see that paper, Kitty, if you don't mind.'

His frown and straightened lip brought fresh wildness into Kitty's expression.

'It is my property.' She kept one hand behind her.

'I heard you just disavow that.'

Kitty laughed angrily.

'Yes—that's the worst of Lord Parham—one has to tell so many lies for his *beaux yeux*!'

'You must give it me, please,' said Ashe quietly. 'I ought to know where I am with Lord Parham. He is clearly bitterly offended—by something, and I shall have to apologise.'

Kitty breathed fast.

'Well, don't let's quarrel before the county!' she said, as she turned aside into a shrubbery walk, edged by clipt yews and hidden from the big lawn. There she paused and confronted him. 'How did you know I wrote it?'

'I saw you write it, and throw it.'

He stretched out his hand. Kitty hesitated, then slowly unclosed her own, and held out the small white palm on which lay the crumpled slip.

Ashe read it, and tore it up.

'That game, Kitty, was hardly worth the candle!'

'It was a perfectly harmless remark—and only meant for Eddie! Anyone else than Lord Parham would have laughed. *Then* I might have begged his pardon.'

'It is what you ought to do now,' said Ashe. 'A little note from you, Kitty—you could write it to perfection——'

'Certainly not'—said Kitty, hastily, locking her hands behind her.

'You prefer to have failed in hospitality and manners,' he said bitterly. 'Well, I'm afraid if you don't feel any disgrace in it I do. Lord Parham is our *guest*!'

And Ashe turned on his heel and would have left her, when Kitty caught him by the arm—

'William!'—

She had grown very pale.

'Yes.'

'You've never spoken to me like that before, Wil-

liam—never! But—as I told you long ago, you can stop it all if you like—in a moment.'

'I don't know what you mean, Kitty,—but we mustn't stay arguing here any longer——'

'No!—but—don't you remember? I told you, you can always send me away. Then I shouldn't be putting spokes in your wheel.'

'I don't deny'—said Ashe slowly,—'it might be wisest, if, next spring you stayed here, for part at least of the Session—or abroad. It is certainly difficult carrying on politics under these conditions. I could of course come backwards and forwards——'

Kitty's brown eyes that were fixed upon his face wavered a little, and she grew even whiter.

'Very well. That would be a kind of separation, wouldn't it?'

'There would be no need to call it by any such name. Oh! Kitty!'—cried Ashe, 'Why can't you behave like a reasonable woman?'

'Separation,' she repeated steadily. 'I know that's what your mother wants.'

A wave of sound reached them amid the green shadow of the yews. The cheers that heralded Royalty had begun.

'Come!' said Kitty.

And she flew across the grass, reaching her place by the central tent, just as the Royalties drove up.

The Prime Minister sulked indoors; and Kitty with the most engaging smiles made his apologies. The heat—the fatigue of the speech—a crushing headache, and a doctor's order!—he begged their Royal Highnesses to excuse him. The Royal Highnesses were at first astonished, inclined perhaps to take offence. But the party was so agreeable, and Lady Kitty so charming a hostess, that the Premier's absence was soon forgotten, and as the day

cooled to a delicious evening, and the most costly bands from town discoursed a melting music, as garlanded boats appeared upon the river inviting passengers, and, with the dusk, fireworks began to ascend from a little hill; as the trees shone green, and silver and rose-colour in the Bengal lights, and amid the sweeping clouds of smoke the wide stretches of the park, the close-packed groups of human beings appeared and vanished like the country and creatures of a dream,—the success of Lady Kitty's fête, the fame of her gaiety and her beauty, filled the air. She flashed hither and thither, in a dress embroidered with wild roses, and a hat festooned with them,—attended always by Eddie Helston, by various curates who cherished a hopeless attachment to her, and by a fat German Grand-Duke, who had come in the wake of the Royalties.

Her cleverness, her resource, her organising power were lauded to the skies, Royalty was gracious, and the Grand-Duke resentfully asked an aide-de-camp on the way home why he had not been informed that such a pretty person awaited him.

'I should den haf looked beforehand—as vel as tinking behind,'—said the Grand-Duke, as he wrapped himself sentimentally in his military cloak, to meditate on Lady Kitty's brown eyes.

Meanwhile Lord Parham remained closeted in his sitting-room with his secretary. Ashe tried to gain admittance; but in vain. Lord Parham pleaded great fatigue and his letters; and asked for a 'Bradshaw.'

'His lordship has inquired if there is a train to-night,' said the little secretary, evidently much flustered.

Ashe protested. And indeed, as it turned out, there was no train worth the taking. Then Lord Parham sent a message that he hoped to appear at dinner.

Kitty locked her door while she was dressing, and Ashe, whose mind was a confusion of many feelings—

anger, compunction, and that fascination which in her brilliant moods she exercised over him no less than over others,—could get no speech with her.

They met on the threshold of the child's room, she coming out, he going in. But she wrenched herself from him and would say nothing. The report of the little boy was good; he smiled at his father, and Ashe felt a cooling balm in the touch of his soft hands and lips. He descended,—in a more philosophical mind; inclined at any rate to 'damn' Lord Parham. What a fool the man must be! Why couldn't he have taken it with a laugh, and so turned the tables on Kitty?

Was there any good to be got out of apologising? Ashe supposed he must attempt it some time that night. A precious awkward business! But relations had got to be restored somehow.

Lady Tranmore overtook him on the way downstairs. In the press of the afternoon they had hardly seen each other.

'What is really wrong with Lord Parham, William?' she asked him anxiously. Ashe hesitated—then whispered a word or two in her ear—begging her to keep the great man in play for the evening. He was to take her in, while Kitty would fall to the Bishop of the diocese.

'She gets on perfectly with the clergy,' said Lady Tranmore,—with an involuntary sigh. Then, as the sense of humour was strong in both, they laughed. But it was a chilly and perfunctory laughter.

They had no sooner passed into the main hall than Kitty came running downstairs, with a large packet in her hand.

'Mr. Darrell!'

'At your service!' said Darrell, emerging from the shadows of one of the broad corridors of the ground-floor.

'Take it, please!' said Kitty, panting a little, as she gave the packet into his hands. 'If I look at it any more, I *might* burn it!'

'Suppose you do!'

'No, no!'—said Kitty, pushing the bundle away, as he laughingly tendered it. 'I must see what happens!'

'Is the gap filled?'

She laid her finger on her lips. Her eyes danced. Then she hurried on to the drawing-room.

Whether it were the soothing presence of the clergy or no, certainly Kitty was no less triumphant at dinner than she had been in the afternoon. The chorus of fun and pleasure that surrounded her, while he himself sat, tired and bored, between Lady Edith Manley and Lady Tranmore, did but make her offence the greater in the eyes of Lord Parham. He had so far buried it in a complete and magnificent silence. The meeting between him and his hostess before dinner had been marked by a strict conformity to all the rules. Kitty had inquired after his headache; Lord Parham expressed his regrets that he had missed so brilliant a party; and Kitty, flirting her fan, invented messages from the Royalties which, as most of those present knew, the Royalties had been far too well amused to think of. Then after this *pas seul*, in the presence of the crowded drawing-room, had been duly executed, Kitty retired to her Bishop, and Lord Parham led forth Lady Tranmore.

'What a lovely moon!' said Lady Edith Manley to the Dean. 'It makes even this house look romantic.'

They were walking outside the drawing-room windows, on a terrace which was indeed the only feature of the Haggart façade which possessed some architectural interest. A low balustrade of terra-cotta, copied from

a famous Italian villa, ran round it, broken by large terra-cotta pots now filled with orange trees. Here and there between the orange trees were statues transported from Naples in the late eighteenth century, by a former Lord Tranmore. There was a Ceres, and a Diana, a Vestal Virgin, an Athlete, and an Antinous, now brought into strange companionship under the windows of this ugly English house. Chipped and blackened as they were, and, to begin with, of a mere decorative importance, they still breathed into the English evening a note of Italy or Greece, of things lovely and immortal. The lamps in the sitting-rooms streamed out through the widely opened windows upon the terrace, chequering the marble figures, which now emerged sharply in the light, and now withdrew into the gloom; while at one point they shone plainly upon an empty pedestal before which the Dean and his companion paused.

The Dean looked at the inscription. 'What a pity! This once held a statue of Hebe, holding a torch. It was struck by lightning fifty years ago.'

'Lady Kitty might stand for her to-night,' said Edith Manley.

For Kitty, the capricious, had appeared at dinner in a *quasi*-Greek dress, white, soft, and flowing, without an ornament. The Dean acquiesced, but rather sadly.

'I wish she had the bloom of Hebe! My dear Lady Edith, our hostess looks *ill*!'

'Does she? I can't tell,—I admire her so!' said the woman beside him, upon whose charming eyes some fairy had breathed kindness and optimism from her cradle.

'*Ouf!*' cried Kitty—as she sprang across the sill of the window behind them—'They're *all* gone! The Bishop wishes me to become a Vice-President of the Women's Diocesan Association. And I've promised three curates to open bazaars. *Ah, mon Dieu!*' she raised her white

arms, with a wild gesture, and then beckoned to Eddie Helston, who was close beside her—

'Shall we try our dance?'

The young men of the house, a group of young guardsmen and diplomats gathered round, laughing and clapping. Kitty's dancing had become famous during the winter as one of her many extravagances. She no longer recited; literature bored her; motion was the only poetry. So she had been carefully instructed by a *danseuse* from the Opera, and in many points, so the enthusiasts declared, had bettered her instructions. She was now in love with a tempestuous Spanish dance, taught her by a gipsy *señorita* who had been one of the sensations of the London season. It required a partner, and she had been practising it with young Helston, for several mornings past, in the empty ballroom. Helston had spread its praises abroad; and all Haggart desired to see it.

'There!'—said Kitty, pointing her partner to a particular spot on the terrace. 'I think that will do. Where are the castanets, I wonder?'

'Kitty!' said a voice behind her. Ashe emerged from the drawing-room.

'Kitty, please!—It is nearly midnight. Everybody is tired—and you yourself must be worn out! Say good-night, and let us all go to bed.'

She turned. William's voice was low, but peremptory. She shook back her hair from her temples and neck, with the gesture he had learnt to dread.

'Nobody's tired,—and nobody wants to go to bed. Please stand out of the way, William. I want plenty of room for my steps.'

And she began pirouetting, as though to try the capacities of the space, humming to herself.

'Helston,—this must be, please, for another night,' said Ashe resolutely, in the young man's ear. 'Lady

Kitty is much too tired.' Then to Lady Edith, and the Dean,—'Lady Edith, it would be very kind of you to persuade my wife to go to bed. She never knows when she is done!'

Lady Edith warmly acquiesced, and hurrying up to Kitty, she tried to persuade her, in soft caressing phrases.

'I stand on my rights!' said the Dean, following her. 'If my hostess is used up to-night, there'll be no hostess for me to-morrow.'

Kitty looked at them all, silent,—her head bending forward, a curious *méchant* look in the eyes that shone beneath the slightly frowning brows. Meanwhile, by her previous order, a footman had brought out two silver lamps, and placed them on a small table a little way behind her. Whether it was from some instinctive sense of the beauty of the small figure in the slender floating dress, under the deep blue of the night sky, and amid the romantic shadows and lights of the terrace,—or from some divination of things significant and hidden,—it would be hard to say; but the group of spectators had fallen back a little from Kitty, so that she stood alone, a picture lit from the left, by the lamps just brought in.

The Dean looked at her,—troubled by her wild aspect, and the evident conflict between her and Ashe. Then an idea flashed into his mind; filled always, like that of an innocent child, with the images of poetry and romance.

'One moment!' he said, raising his hand. 'Lady Kitty, you spoil us! After amusing us all day, now you would dance for us all night. But your guests won't let you! We love you too well, and we want a bit of you left for to-morrow. Never mind! You offered us a dance,—you bring us a vision—and a poem!—Friends!'—

He turned to those crowding round him, his white hair glistening in the lamplight, his delicate face, so old and yet so eager, the smile on his kind lips, and all the details

of his Dean's dress—apron and knee-breeches, slender legs and silver buckles—thrown out in sharp relief upon the dark. . . .

'Friends! you see this pedestal. Once Hebe, the cup-bearer of the gods, stood there. Then—ungrateful Zeus smote her, and she fell! But the Hours and the Graces bore her safe away, into a golden land, and now they bring her back again.—Behold her!—Hebe re-born!'

He bowed, his courtly hand upon his breast, and a wave of laughter and applause ran through the young group round him, as their eyes turned from the speaker to the exquisite figure of Kitty. Lady Edith smiled kindly, clapping her soft hands. Mrs. Winston, the Dean's wife, had eyes only for the Dean. In the background Lady Tranmore watched every phase of Kitty's looks;—and Lord Grosville walked back into the dining-room, growling unutterable things to Darrell as he passed.

Kitty raised her head to reply. But the Dean checked her. Advancing a step or two, he saluted her again—profoundly.

'Dear Lady Kitty!—dear bringer of light and ambrosia!—rest, and good-night! Your guests thank you by me, with all their hearts. You have been the life of their day, the spirit of their mirth. Good-night to Hebe!—and three cheers for Lady Kitty!'

Eddie Helston led them, and they rang against the old house. Kitty with a fluttering smile kissed her hand for thanks, and the Dean saw her look round,—dart a swift glance at Ashe. He stood against the window-frame, in shadow, motionless, his arms folded.

Then suddenly Kitty sprang forward.

'Give me that lamp!' she said to the young footman behind her.

And in a second she had leapt upon the low wall of

the terrace, and on the vacant pedestal. The lad to whom she had spoken, lost his head and obeyed her. He raised the lamp She stooped and took it. Ashe, who was now standing in the open window with his back to the terrace, turned round, saw, and rushed forward.

'Kitty!—put it down!'

'Lady Kitty!'—cried the Dean in dismay, while all behind him held their breath.

'Stand back!' said Kitty, 'or I shall drop it!' She held up the lamp, straight and steady. Ashe paused,—in an agony of doubt what to do, his whole soul concentrated on the slender arm, and on the brightly burning lamp.—

'If you make me speeches,'—said Kitty,—'I must reply, mustn't I?—(Keep back, William!—I'm all right.) Hebe thanks you, please—*mille fois!* She herself hasn't been happy—and she's afraid she hasn't been good! *N'importe!* It's all done—and finished. The play's over!—and the lights go out!'

She waved the lamp above her head.

'Kitty! for God's sake!' cried Ashe, rushing to her.

'She is mad!' said Lord Parham, standing at the back. 'I always knew it!'

The other spectators passed through a second of anguish. The bright figure on the pedestal wavered; one moment, and it seemed as though the lamp must descend crashing upon the head and neck and the white dress beneath it; the next, it had fallen from Kitty's hand,—fallen away from her—wide and safe—into the depths of the garden below. A flash of wild light rose from the burning oil, and from the dry shrubs amid which it fell. Kitty meanwhile swayed—and dropped—heavily unconscious—into William Ashe's arms.

Kitty barely recovered life and sense during the night

that followed. And while she was still unconscious, her boy passed away. The poor babe, all ignorant of the straits in which his mother lay, was seized with convulsions in the dawn, and gave up his frail life gathered to his father's breast.

Some ten weeks later, towards the end of October, Society knew that the Home Secretary and Lady Kitty had started for Italy,—bound first of all for Venice. It was said that Lady Kitty was a wreck, and that it was doubtful whether she would ever recover the sudden and tragic death of her only child.

PART IV

STORM

Myself, arch-traitor to myself;
My hollowest friend, my deadliest foe,
My clog whatever road I go.'

CHAPTER XVII

'Among the numerous daubs with which Tintoret, to his everlasting shame, has covered this church——'

'Good Heavens!—what does the man mean?—or is he talking of another church?' said Ashe, raising his head and looking in bewilderment, first at the magnificent Tintoret in front of him, and then at the lines he had just been reading.

'William!' cried Kitty,—'*Do* put that fool down, and come here; one sees it splendidly!'

She was standing in one of the choir-stalls of San Giorgio Maggiore, somewhat raised above the point where Ashe had been studying his German hand-book.

'My dear!—if this man don't know, who does!' cried Ashe, flourishing his volume in front of him as he obeyed her.

'"Dans le royaume des aveugles—"' said Kitty contemptuously. 'As if any German could even begin to understand Tintoret! But,—don't talk!'

And clasping both hands round Ashe's arm, she stood leaning heavily upon him, her whole soul gazing from the eyes she turned upon the picture, her lips quivering, as though, from some physical weakness, she could only just hold back the tears with which indeed the face was charged.

She and Ashe were looking at that Last Supper of Tintoret's, which hangs in the Choir of San Giorgio Maggiore at Venice.

It is a picture dear to all lovers of Tintoret, breathing in every line and group the passionate and mystical fancy of the master.

The scene passes, it will be remembered, in what seems to be the spacious guest-chamber of an inn. The Lord and His disciples are gathered round the last sacred meal of the Old Covenant, the first of the New. On the left, a long table stretches from the spectator into the depths of the picture; the disciples are ranged along one side of it; and on the other sits Judas, solitary and accursed. The young Christ has risen; he holds the bread in his lifted hands and is about to give it to the beloved disciple, while Peter beyond, rising from his seat in his eagerness, presses forward to claim his own part in the Lord's body.

The action of the Christ has in it a very ecstasy of giving; the bending form indeed is love itself, yearning and triumphant. This is further expressed in the light which streams from the head of the Lord, playing upon the long line of faces, illuminating the vehement gesture of Peter, the adoring and radiant silence of St. John,—and striking even to the furthest corners of the room, upon a woman, a child, a playing dog. Meanwhile from the hanging lamps above the supper-party, there glows another and more earthly light, mingled with fumes of smoke which darken the upper air. But such is the power of the Divine figure, that from this very darkness, breaks adoration. The smoke-wreaths change under the gazer's eye into hovering angels, who float round the head of the Saviour, and look down with awe upon the first Eucharist; while the lamp-light, interpenetrated by the glory which issues from the Lord, searches every face and fold and surface, displays the figures of the serving men and women in the background, shines on the household stuff, the vases and plates, the black and white of the marble floor, the

beams of the old Venetian ceiling. Everywhere the double ray, the two-fold magic! Steeped in these 'majesties of light,' the immortal scene lives upon the quiet wall. Year after year the slender thought-worn Christ raises his hands of blessing; the disciples strain towards him; the angels issue from the darkness; the friendly domestic life, happy, natural, unconscious, frames the Divine mystery. And among those who come to look, there are from time to time men and women who draw from it that restlessness of vague emotion which Kitty felt, as she hung now, gazing, on Ashe's arm.

For there is in it an appeal which torments them,—like the winding of a mystic horn, on purple heights, by some approaching and unseen messenger. Ineffable beauty, offering itself,—and in the human soul, the eternal human discord:—what else makes the poignancy of art?—the passion of poetry?

'That's enough!' said Kitty, at last, turning abruptly away.

'You like it?' said Ashe, softly, detaining her, while he pressed the little hand upon his arm. His heart was filled with a great pity for his wife in these days.

'Oh, I don't know!' was Kitty's impatient reply. 'It haunts me. There's still another to see,—in a chapel. The sacristan's making signs to us.

'Is there?' Ashe stifled a yawn. He asked Margaret French, who had come up with them, whether Kitty had not had quite enough sight-seeing. He himself must go to the Piazza and get the news before dinner. As an English Cabinet Minister, he had been admitted to the best club of the Venice residents. Telegrams were to be seen there; and there was anxious news from the Balkans.

Kitty merely insisted that she could not and would not go without her remaining Tintoret, and the others

yielded to her at once, with that indulgent tenderness one shows to the wilfulness of a sick child. She and Margaret followed the sacristan. Ashe lingered behind in a passage of the church, surreptitiously reading an Italian newspaper. He had the ordinary cultivated pleasure in pictures; but this ardour which Kitty was throwing into her pursuit of Tintoret,—the Wagner of painting—left him cold. He did not attempt to keep up with her.

Two ladies were already in the cloister chapel, with a gentleman. As Kitty and her friend entered, these persons had just finished their inspection of the damaged but most beautiful Pietà which hangs over the altar, and their faces were towards the entrance.

'Maman!' . . cried Kitty in amazement.

The lady addressed started, put up a gold-rimmed eyeglass, exclaimed, and hurried forward.

Kitty and she embraced, amid a torrent of laughter and interjections from the elder lady, and then Kitty, whose pale cheeks had put on scarlet, turned to Margaret French.

'Margaret!—my mother, Madame d'Estrées.'

Miss French, who found herself greeted with effusion by the strange lady, saw before her a woman of fifty, marvellously preserved. Madame d'Estrées had grown stout; so much time had claimed; but the elegant grey dress with its floating chiffon and lace skilfully concealed the fact; and for the rest, complexion, eyes, lips were still defiant of the years. If it were art that had achieved it, nature still took the credit; it was so finely done, the spectator could only lend himself and admire. Under the pretty hat of grey tulle, whereof the strings were tied bonnet-fashion under the plump chin, there looked out, indeed, a face gay, happy, unconcerned, proof one might have thought of an innocent past, and a good conscience.—

Kitty, who had drawn back a little, eyed her mother oddly.

'I thought you were in Paris. Your letter said you wouldn't be able to move for weeks——'

'*Ma chère!—un miracle!*' cried Madame d'Estrées, blushing however under her thin white veil, 'When I wrote to you, I was at death's door—wasn't I?' She appealed to her companion, without waiting for an answer.—'Then someone told me of a new doctor, and in ten days, *me voici*! They insisted on my going away,—this dear woman—Donna Laura Vercelli,—my daughter, Lady Kitty Ashe!—knew of an apartment here, belonging to some relations of hers. And here we are—charmingly *installées!*—and really *nothing* to pay!'—Madame d'Estrées whispered smiling, in Kitty's ear—'nothing, compared to the hotels. I'm economising splendidly.—Laura looks after every sou. Ah! my dear William!'—

For Ashe, puzzled by the voices within, had entered the chapel, and stood in his turn, open-mouthed.

'Why, we thought you were an invalid.'

For, some three weeks before, a letter had reached him at Haggart, so full of melancholy details as to Madame d'Estrées' health and circumstances that even Kitty had been moved. Money had been sent; inquiries had been made by telegraph; and but for a hasty message of a more cheerful character, received just before they started, the Ashes, instead of journeying by Brussels and Cologne would have gone by Paris that Kitty might see her mother. They had intended to stop there on their way back. Ashe was not minded that Kitty should see more of Madame d'Estrées than necessity demanded; but on this occasion he would have felt it positively brutal to make difficulties.—

And now here was this moribund lady, this forsaken of gods and men, disporting herself at Venice, evidently in the pink of health and attired in the freshest of Paris toilettes!—As he coldly shook hands, Ashe registered an

inner vow that Madame d'Estrées' letters henceforward should receive the attention they deserved.

And beside her was her somewhat mysterious friend of London days, the Colonel Warington, who had been so familiar a figure in the gatherings of St. James's Place,—grown much older, almost white-haired, and as gentlemanly as ever. Who was the lady? Ashe was introduced, was aware of a somewhat dark and Jewish cast of face, noticed some fine jewels, and could only suppose that his mother-in-law had picked up someone to finance her, and provide her with creature comforts in return for the social talents that Madame d'Estrées still possessed in some abundance. He had more than once noticed her skill in similar devices; but, indeed, they were indispensable, for while he allowed Madame d'Estrées one thousand a year, she was, it seemed, firmly determined to spend a minimum of three.

He and Warington looked at each other with curiosity. The bronzed face and honest eyes of the soldier betrayed nothing. 'Are you going to marry her at last?' thought Ashe. 'Poor devil!'

Meanwhile Madame d'Estrées chattered away as though nothing could be more natural than their meeting, or more perfect than the relations between herself and her daughter and son-in-law.

As they all strolled down the church she looked keenly at Kitty.

'My dear child, how ill you look!—and your mourning! Ah yes, of course!'—she bit her lip—'I remember—the poor poor boy'—

'Thank you!' said Kitty hastily. 'I got your letter,—thank you very much. Where are you staying? We've got rooms on the Grand Canal.'

'Oh but, Kitty!' cried Madame d'Estrées—'I was so sorry for you!'

'Were you?' said Kitty, under her breath. 'Then, please, never speak of him to me again!'

Startled and offended, Madame d'Estrées looked at her daughter. But what she saw disarmed her. For once even, she felt something like the pang of a mother. 'You're *dreadfully* thin, Kitty!'

Kitty frowned with annoyance.

'It's not my fault,' she said, pettishly. 'I live on cream, and it's no good. Of course, I know I'm an object and a scarecrow; but I'd rather people didn't tell me.'

'What nonsense, *chère enfant*! You're much prettier than you ever were.'

A wild and fugitive radiance swept across the face beside her.

'Am I?' said Kitty, smiling. 'That's all right! If I had died, it wouldn't matter, of course. But——'

'Died! what do you mean, Kitty?' said Madame d'Estrées in bewilderment. 'When William wrote to me, I thought he meant you had over-tired yourself.'

'Oh well, the doctors said it was touch and go,—' said Kitty, indifferently. 'But of course, it wasn't. I'm much too tough. And then they fussed about one's heart. And that's all nonsense too. I couldn't die if I tried.'

But Madame d'Estrées pondered the bright intermittent colour, the emaciation, the hollowness of the eyes. The effect, so far, was to add to Kitty's natural distinction, to give, rather, a touch of pathos to a face which even in its wildest mirth had in it something alien and remote. But she too reflected that, a little more, a very little more, and—in a night—the face would have dropped its beauty, as a rose its petals.

The group stood talking awhile on the steps outside the church. Kitty and her mother exchanged addresses, Donna Laura opened her mouth once or twice, and produced a few contorted smiles for Kitty's benefit, while

Colonel Warington tipped the sacristan, found the gondolier, and studied the guide-book.

As Madame d'Estrées stepped into her gondola, assisted by him, she tapped him on the arm.

'Are you coming, Markham?'

The low voice was pitched in a very intimate note. Kitty turned with a start.

'A casa!' said Madame d'Estrées, and she and her friend made for one of the Canals that pierce the Zattere, while Colonel Warington went off for a walk along the Giudecca.

Kitty and Ashe bade their gondoliers take them to the Piazzetta and presently they were gliding across waters of flame and silver, where the white front and red campanile of San Giorgio,—now blazing under the sunset—mirrored themselves in the lagoon. The autumn evening was fresh and gay. A light breeze was on the water; lights that only Venice knows shone on the tawny sails of fishing-boats making for the Lido, on the white sides of an English yacht, on the burnished prows of the gondolas, on the warm reddish-white of the Ducal Palace. The air blowing from the Adriatic breathed into their faces the strength of the sea; and in the far distance, above that line of buildings where lies the heart of Venice, the high ghosts of the Friulian Alps glimmered amid the sweeping regiments and purple shadows of the land-hurrying clouds.

'This does you good, darling!' said Ashe stooping down to look into his wife's face, as she nestled beside him, on the soft cushions of the gondola.

Kitty gave him a slight smile, then said with a furrowed brow—

'Who could ever have thought we should find *Maman* here!'

'Don't have her on your mind!' said Ashe, with some sharpness. 'I can't have anything worrying you.'

She slipped her hand into his.

'Is that man going to marry her—at last? She called him "Markham." That's new.'

'Looks rather like it,' said Ashe. 'Then *he'll* have to look after the debts!'

They began to piece together what they knew of Colonel Warington and his relation to Madame d'Estrées. It was not much. But Ashe believed that originally Warington had not been in love with her at all. There had been a love-affair between her and Warington's younger brother, a smart artillery officer, when she was the widowed Lady Blackwater. She had behaved with more heart and scruple than she had generally been known to do in these matters, and the young officer adored her, hoped indeed to marry her. But he was called on—in Paris—to fight a duel on her account, and was killed. Before fighting, he had commended Lady Blackwater to the care of his much older brother, also a soldier, between whom and himself there existed a rare and passionate devotion; and ever since the poor lad's death, Markham Warington had been the friend and quasi-guardian of the lady,—through her second marriage, through the chequered years of her existence in London, and now through the later years of her residence on the Continent, a residence forced upon her by her agreement with the Tranmores. Again and again he had saved her from bankruptcy, or from some worse scandal which would have wrecked the last remnants of her fame.

But, all the time, he was himself bound by strong ties of gratitude and affection to an elder sister, who had brought him up; with whom he lived in Scotland during half the year. And this stout Puritan lady detested the very name of Madame d'Estrées.—

'But she's dead,' said Ashe. 'I remember noticing her death in the "Times" some three months ago. That of course explains it. Now he's free to marry.'

'And so Maman will settle down, and be happy ever afterwards!' said Kitty with a sarcastic lifting of the brow. 'Why should anybody be good?'

The bitterness of her look struck Ashe disagreeably. That any child should speak so of a mother was a tragic and sinister thing. But he was well aware of the causes.

'Were you very unhappy when you were a child, Kitty?' He pressed the hand he held.

'No,' said Kitty, shortly. 'I'm too like Maman. I suppose, really, at bottom, I liked all the debts, and the excitement, and the shady people!'

'That wasn't the impression you gave me, in the first days of our acquaintance!' said Ashe laughing.

'Oh! then I was grown up—and there were drawbacks. But I'm made of the same stuff as Maman,' she said obstinately,—'except that I can't tell so many fibs. That's really why we didn't get on.'

Her brown eyes held him with that strange unspoken defiance it seemed so often beyond her power to hide. It was like the fluttering of some caged thing hungering for it knows not what. Then as they scanned the patient good-temper of his face, they melted; and her little fingers squeezed his; while Margaret French kept her eyes fixed on the two columns of the Piazzetta.

'How strange to find her here!' said Kitty under her breath. 'Now if it had been Alice—my sister Alice!'

William nodded. It had been known to them for some time that Lady Alice Wensleydale, to whom Italy had become a second country, had settled in a villa near Treviso, where she occupied herself with a lace school for women and girls.

The mention of her sister threw Kitty into what

seemed to be a disagreeable reverie. The flush brought by the sea-wind faded. Ashe looked at her with anxiety.

'You have done too much, Kitty,—as usual!'

His voice was almost angry.

She shrugged her shoulders.

'What does it matter? You know very well it would be much better for you if ——'

'If what?'

'If I followed Harry.' The words were just breathed, and her eyes shrank from meeting his. Ashe on the other hand turned and looked at her steadily.

'Are you quite determined I sha'n't get *any* joy out of my holiday?'

She shook her head uncertainly. Then, almost immediately she began to chatter to Margaret French about the sights of the lagoon, with her natural trenchancy and fun. But her hand, hidden under the folds of her black cloak, still clung to William's.

'It is her illness,' he said to himself, 'and the loss of the child.'

And at the remembrance of his little son, a wave of sore yearning filled his own heart. Deep under the occupations and interests of the mind lay this passionate regret, and at any moment of pause or silence its 'buried life' arose and seized him. But he was a busy politician, absorbed even in these days of holiday, by the questions and problems of the hour. And Kitty was a delicate woman—with no defence against the torture of grief.

He thought of those first days after the child's death, when in spite of the urgency of the doctors it had been impossible to keep the news from Kitty; of the ghastly effect of it upon nerves and brain already imperilled by causes only half intelligible; of those sudden flights from her nurses, when the days of convalescence began, to the child's room, and later, to his grave. There was

stinging pain in these recollections. Nor was he in truth much reassured by his wife's more recent state. It was impossible indeed that he should give it the same constant thought as a woman might,—or a man of another and more emotional type. At this moment, perhaps, he had literally no *time* for the subtleties of introspective feeling, even had his temperament inclined him to them, which was in truth not the case. He knew that Kitty had suddenly and resolutely ceased to talk about the boy, had thrown herself with the old energy into new pursuits, and, since she came to Venice in particular, had shown a feverish desire to fill every hour with movement and sight-seeing.

But was she in truth much better?—in body or soul?—poor child! The doctors had explained her illness as nervous collapse, pointing back to a long preceding period of over-strain and excitement. There had been suspicions of tubercular mischief; but no precise test was then at command; and as Kitty had improved with rest and feeding the idea had been abandoned. But Ashe was still haunted by it, though quite ready—being a natural optimist—to escape from it, and all other incurable anxieties as soon as Kitty herself should give the signal.

As to the moral difficulties and worries of those months at Haggart, Ashe remembered them as little as might be. Kitty's illness indeed had shown itself in more directions than one, as an amending and appeasing fact. Even Lord Parham had been moved to compassion and kindness by the immediate results of that horrible scene on the terrace. His leave-taking from Ashe on the morning afterwards had been almost cordial,—almost intimate. And as to Lady Tranmore, whenever she had been able to leave her paralysed husband, she had been with Kitty, nursing her with affectionate wisdom night and day. While on the other members of the Haggart

party, the sheer pity of Kitty's condition had worked with surprising force. Lord Grosville had actually made his wife offer Grosville Park for Kitty's convalescence,—Kitty got her first laugh out of the proposal. The Dean had journeyed several times from his distant cathedral town to see and sit with Kitty; Eddie Helston's flowers had been almost a nuisance; Mrs. Alcot had shown herself quite soft and human.

The effect, indeed, of this general sympathy on Lord Parham's relations to the chief member of his Cabinet had been but small and passing. Ashe disliked and distrusted him more than ever; and whatever might have happened to the Premier's resentment of a particular offence, there could be no doubt that a visit from which Ashe had hoped much had ended in complete failure, that Parham was disposed to cross his powerful henchman where he could, and that intrigue was busy in the Cabinet itself against the reforming party of which Ashe was the head. Ashe indeed felt his own official position, outwardly so strong, by no means secure. But the game of politics was none the less exhilarating for that.

As to Kitty's relation to himself,—and life's most intimate and tender things,—in these days, did he probe his own consciousness much concerning them? Probably not. Was he aware that, when all was said and done, in spite of her misdoings, in spite of his passion of anxiety during her illness, in spite of the pity and affection of his daily attitude, Kitty occupied in truth much less of his mind than she had ever yet occupied?—that a certain magic—primal, incommunicable,—had ceased to clothe her image in his thoughts?

Again,—probably not. For these slow changes in a man's inmost personality are like the ebb and flow of summer tides over estuary sands. Silent, the main creeps in, or out; and while we dream, the great basin

fills, and the fishing-boats come in,—or the gentle pitiless waters draw back into the bosom of ocean, and the sea-birds run over the wide untenanted flats.

They landed at the Piazzetta, as the lamps were being lit. The soft October darkness was falling fast, and on the ledges of St. Mark's and the Ducal Palace the pigeons had begun to roost. An animated crowd was walking up and down in the Piazza, where a band was playing; and on the golden horses of St. Mark's there shone a pale and mystical light, the last reflection from the western sky. Under the colonnades the jewellers and glass-shops blazed and sparkled, and the warm sea-wind fluttered the Italian flags on the great flagstaffs, that but so recently had borne the Austrian eagle.

Ashe walked with his head thrown back, thinking absently, in this centre of Venice, of English politics, and of a phrase of Metternich's he had come across in a volume of memoirs he had been lately reading on the journey:—

'Le jour qui court n'a aucune valeur pour moi, excepté comme la veille du lendemain. C'est toujours avec le lendemain que mon esprit lutte.'

The phrase pleased him particularly.

He, too, was wrestling with the morrow, though in another sense than Metternich's. His mind was alive with projects; an exultant consciousness both of capacity and opportunity possessed him.

'Why, you've passed the Club, William!' said Kitty.

Ashe awoke with a start, smiled at her, and with a wave of the hand disappeared in a stairway to the right.

Margaret French lingered in a bead-shop to make some purchases. Kitty walked home alone, and Margaret, whose watchful affection never failed, knew that she preferred it, and let her go her way.

The Ashes had rooms on the first bend of the Grand Canal looking south. To reach them by land from the Piazza, Kitty had to pass through a series of narrow streets or *calles*, broken by *campos* or small squares, in which stood churches. As she passed one of these churches, she was attracted by the sound of gay music, and by the crowd about the entrance. Pushing aside the leathern curtain over the door, she found herself in a great rococo nave, which blazed with lights and decorations. Lines of huge wax candles were fixed in temporary holders along the floor. The pillars were swathed in rose-coloured damask, and the choir was ablaze with flowers, and even more brilliantly lit, if possible, than the rest of the church.

Kitty's Catholic training told her that an Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament was going on. Mechanically she dipped her fingers into the holy water, she made her genuflection to the altar, and knelt down in one of the back rows.

How rich and sparkling it was,—the lights, the bright colours, the dancing music! '*Dolce Sacramento!—Santo Sacramento!*' these words of an Italian hymn or litany recurred again and again, with endless iteration. Kitty's sensuous, excitable nature was stirred with delight. Then, suddenly, she remembered her child; and the little face she had seen for the last time in the coffin. She began to cry softly, hiding her face in her black veil. An unbearable longing possessed her. 'I shall never have another child,' she thought. '*That's* all over.'

Then her thoughts wandered back to the party at Haggart, to the scene on the terrace, and to that rush of excitement which had mastered her, she scarcely knew how or why. She could still hear the Dean's voice,—see the lamp wavering above her head. 'What possessed

me! I didn't care a straw whether the lamp set me on fire—whether I lived or died. I wanted to die.'

Was it because of that short conversation with William in the afternoon?—because of the calmness with which he had taken that word 'separation,' which she had thrown at him, merely as a child boasts and threatens, never expecting for one moment to be taken at its word. She had proposed it to him before, after the night at Hamel Weir; she had been serious then; it had been an impulse of remorse; and he had laughed at her. But at Haggart it had been an impulse of temper; and he had taken it seriously. How the wound had rankled, all the afternoon, while she was chattering to the Royalties! And as she jumped on the pedestal, and saw his face of horror, there was the typical womanish triumph that she had made him *feel*,—would make him feel yet more.

How good, how tender he had been to her in her illness! And yet—yet?

'He cares for politics, for his plans,—not for me. He will never trust me again—as he did once. He'll never ask me to help him,—he'll find ways not to,—though he'll be very sweet to me all the time.'

And the thought of her nullity with him in the future, her insignificance in his life, tortured her.

Why had she treated Lord Parham so? 'I can be a lady when I choose,'—she said mockingly to herself—'I wasn't even a lady.'

Then suddenly there flashed on her memory a little picture of Lord Parham, standing spectacled and bewildered, peering into her slip of paper.—She bent her head on her hands and laughed, a stifled hysterical laugh, which scandalised the woman kneeling beside her.

But the laugh was soon quenched again in restless pain. William's affection had been her only refuge in

those weeks of moral and physical misery she had just passed through.

'But it's only because he's so terribly sorry for me. It's all quite different. And I can't ever make him love me again in the old way. . . . It wasn't my fault. It's something born in me—that catches me by the throat.'

And she had the actual physical sense of someone strangled by a possessing force.

'*Dolce Sacramento!—Santo Sacramento!*' . . The music swayed and echoed through the church. Kitty uncovered her eyes and felt a sudden exhilaration in the blaze of light. It reminded her of the bending Christ in the picture of San Giorgio. Awe and beauty flowed in upon her, in spite of the poor music and the tawdry church. What if she tried religion?—recalled what she had been taught in the convent?—gave herself up to a director?

She shivered and recoiled. How would she ever maintain her faith against William?—William who knew so much more than she?

Then, into the emptiness of her heart, there stole the inevitable temptations of memory. Where was Geoffrey? She knew well that he was a violent and selfish man; but he understood much in her that William would never understand. With a morbid eagerness, she recalled the play of feeling between them, before that mad evening at Hamel Weir. What perpetual excitement!—no time to think—or regret!

During her weeks of illness she had lost all count of his movements. Had he been still writing during the summer for the newspaper which had sent him out? Had there not been rumours of his being wounded?—or attacked by fever? Her memory, still vague and weak, struggled painfully with memories it could not recapture.

The Italian paper of that morning—she had spelled it

out for herself at breakfast—had spoken of a defeat of the insurrectionary forces, and of their withdrawal into the highlands of Bosnia. There would be a lull in the fighting. Would he come home? And all this time had he been the mere spectator and reporter, or fighting himself? Her pulses leapt as she thought of him leading down-trodden peasants against the Turk.

But she knew nothing. Surely during the last few months he had purposely made a mystery of his doings and his whereabouts. The only sign of him which seemed to have reached England had been that volume of poems—with those hateful lines! Her lip quivered. She was like a weak child,—unable to bear the thought of anything hostile and unkind.

If he had already turned homewards? Perhaps he would come through Venice? Anyway he was not far off. The day before she and Margaret had made their first visit to the Lido. And as Kitty stood fronting the Adriatic waves, she had dreamed that somewhere, beyond the farther coast, were those Bosnian mountains in which Geoffrey had passed the winter.

Then she started at her own thoughts, rose,—loathing herself,—drew down her veil, and moved towards the door.

As she reached the leathern curtain which hung over the doorway, a lady in front who was passing through held the curtain aside that Kitty might follow. Kitty stepped into the street and looked up to say a mechanical 'Thank you.'

But the word died on her lips. She gave a stifled cry, which was echoed by the woman before her.

Both stood motionless, staring at each other.

Kitty recovered herself first.

'It's not my fault that we've met,' she said, panting a

little. 'Don't look at me so—so unkindly. I know you don't want to see me. Why—why should we speak at all? I'm going away.' And she turned with a gesture of farewell.

Alice Wensleydale laid a detaining hand on Kitty's arm.

'No!—stay a moment. You are in black. You look ill.'

Kitty turned towards her. They had moved on instinctively into the shelter of one of the narrow streets.

'My boy died,—two months ago,' she said, holding herself proudly aloof.

Lady Alice started.

'I hadn't heard. I'm very sorry for you. How old was he?'

'Three years old.'

'Poor baby!' The words were very low and soft. 'My boy—was fourteen. But you have other children?'

'No,—and I don't want them. They might die too.'

Lady Alice paused. She still held her half-sister by the arm, towering above her. She was quite as thin as Kitty, but much taller and more largely built; and, beside the elaborate elegance of Kitty's mourning, Alice's black veil and dress had a severe conventual air. They were almost the dress of a religious.

'How are you?' she said gently. 'I often think of you. Are you happy in your marriage?'

Kitty laughed.

'We're such a happy lot, aren't we? We understand it so well.—Oh! don't trouble about me. You know you said you couldn't have anything to do with me. Are you staying in Venice?'

'I came in from Treviso for a day or two, to see a friend——'

'You had better not stay,'—said Kitty hastily. 'Maman is here. At least if you don't want to run across her.'

Lady Alice let go her hold.

'I shall go home to-morrow morning.'

They moved on a few steps in silence. Then Alice paused. Kitty's delicate face and cloud of hair made a pale luminous spot in the darkness of the *calle*. Alice looked at her with emotion.

'I want to say something to you.'

'Yes?'

'If you are ever in trouble—if you ever want me, send for me. Address Treviso, and it will always find me.'

Kitty made no reply. They had reached a bridge over a side canal, and she stopped, leaning on the parapet.

'Did you hear what I said?' asked her companion.

'Yes. I'll remember. I suppose you think it your duty. What do you do with yourself?'

'I have two orphan children I bring up. And there is my lace-school. It doesn't get on much; but it occupies me.'

'Are you a Catholic?'

'Yes.'

'Wish I was!' said Kitty. She hung over the marble balustrade in silence, looking at the crescent moon that was just peering over the eastern palaces of the canal. 'My husband is in politics, you know. He's Home Secretary.'

'Yes, I heard. Do you help him?'

'No,—just the other thing.'

Kitty lifted up a pebble, and let it drop into the water.

'I don't know what you mean by that,' said Alice Wensleydale coldly. 'If you don't help him you'll be sorry—when it's too late to be sorry.'

'Oh, I know!' said Kitty. Then she moved rest-

lessly. 'I must go in. Good-night.' She held out her hand.

Lady Alice took it.

'Good-night. And remember!'

'I sha'n't want anybody,' said Kitty. '*Addio!*' She waved her hand, and Alice Wensleydale, whose way lay towards the Piazza, saw her disappear, a small tripping shadow, between the high close-piled houses.

Kitty was in so much excitement after this conversation that when she reached the Campo San Maurizio, where she should have turned abruptly to the left, she wandered awhile up and down the Campo, looking at the gondolas on the Traghetto between it and the *Accademia*, at the Church of San Maurizio, at the rising moon, and the bright lights in some of the shop windows of the small streets to the north. The sea-wind was still warm and gusty, and the waves in the Grand Canal beat against the marble feet of its palaces.

At last she found her way through narrow passages, past hidden and historic buildings, to the back of the palace on the Grand Canal in which their rooms were. A door in a small court opened to her ring. She found herself in a dark ground-floor—empty except for the *felze* or black top of a gondola,—of which the further doors opened on the Canal. A cheerful Italian servant brought lights, and on the marble stairs was her maid waiting for her. In a few minutes she was on her sofa by a bright wood fire, while Blanche hovered round her with many small attentions.

'Have you seen your letters, my lady?' And Blanche handed her a pile. Upon a parcel lying uppermost Kitty pounced at once with avidity. She tore it open—pausing once, with scarlet cheeks, to look round her at the door, as though she were afraid of being seen.

A book,—fresh and new,—emerged. 'Politics and the Country Houses':—so ran the title on the back. Kitty looked at it frowning. 'He might have found a better name!' Then she opened it,—looked at a page here and a page there,—laughed, shivered,—and at last bethought her to read the note from the publisher which accompanied it.

'"Much pleasure—the first printed copy—three more to follow—sure to make a sensation"—hateful wretch!—"if your ladyship will let us know how many presentation copies"—Goodness!—not *one*! Oh—well!—Madeleine perhaps,—and of course Mr. Darrell.'

She opened a little despatch-box in which she kept her letters, and slipped the book in.

'I won't show it to William to-night—not—not till next week.' The book was to be out on the 20th, a week ahead,—three months from the day when she had given the MS. into Darrell's hands. She had been spared all the trouble of correcting proofs, which had been done for her by the publisher's reader, on the plea of her illness. She had received and destroyed various letters from him—almost without reading them,—during a short absence of William's in the north.

Suddenly, a start of terror ran through her. 'No, no!' she said, wrestling with herself,—'he'll scold me, perhaps—at first; of course I know he'll do that. And then, I'll make him laugh! He can't—he can't help laughing. I *know* it 'll amuse him. He'll see how I meant it, too.—And nobody need ever find out.'

She heard his step outside, hastily locked her despatch-box, threw a shawl over it, and lay back languidly on her pillows, awaiting him.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE following morning early, a note was brought to Kitty from Madame d'Estrées:

'Darling Kitty,—Will you join us to-night in an expedition? You know that Princess Margherita is staying on the Grand Canal?—in one of the Mocenigo palaces. There is to be a Serenata in her honour to-night,—not one of those vulgar affairs which the hotels get up, but really good music and fine voices,—money to be given to some hospital or other. Do come with us. I suppose you have your own gondola as we have. The gondolas who wish to follow meet at the Piazzetta, weather permitting, 8 o'clock. I know, of course, that you are not going out. But this is *only* music!—and for a charity. One just sits in one's gondola, and follows the music up the Canal. Send word by bearer.

'Your fond mother,

'MARGUERITE D'ESTRÉES.'

Kitty tossed the note over to Ashe. 'Aren't you dining out somewhere to-night?'

Her voice was listless. And as Ashe lifted his head from the Cabinet papers which had just reached him by special messenger, his attention was disagreeably recalled from high matters of State to the very evident delicacy of his wife. He replied that he had promised to dine with Prince S—— at Danieli's, in order to talk Italian

politics. 'But I can throw it over in a moment, if you want me. I came to Venice for *you*, darling,' he said, as he rose and joined her on the balcony which commanded a fine stretch of the Canal.

'No, no! Go and dine with your Prince. I'll go with Maman,—Margaret and I. At least,—Margaret must of course please herself!'

She shrugged her shoulders, and then added, 'Maman's probably in the pink of society here. Venice doesn't take its cue from people like Aunt Lina!'

Ashe smiled uncomfortably. He was in truth by this time infinitely better acquainted with the incidents of Madame d'Estrées's past career than Kitty was. He had no mind whatever that Kitty should become less ignorant, but his knowledge sometimes made conversation difficult.

Kitty was perfectly aware of his embarrassment.

'You never tell me——' she said abruptly. 'Did she really do such dreadful things?'

'My dear Kitty!—why talk about it?'

Kitty flushed, then threw a flower into the water below with a defiant gesture.

'What does it matter? It's all so long ago. I have nothing to do with what I did ten years ago—nothing!'

'A convenient doctrine!' laughed Ashe. 'But it cuts both ways. You get neither the good of your good, nor the bad of your bad.'

'I have no good,' said Kitty bitterly.

'What's the matter with you, Miladi?' said Ashe, half scolding, half tender. 'You growl over my remarks as though you were your own small dog with a bone. Come here and let me tell you the news.'

And drawing the sofa up to the open window which commanded the marvellous water-way outside, with its rows of palaces on either hand, he made her lie down, while he read her extracts from his letters.

Margaret French, who was writing at the further side of the room, glanced at them furtively from time to time. She saw that Ashe was trying to charm away the languor of his companion by that talk of his, shrewd, humorous, vehement, well-informed, which made him so welcome to the men of his own class and mode of life. And when he talked to a woman as he was accustomed to talk to men, that woman felt it a compliment. Under the stimulus of it, Kitty woke up, laughed, argued, teased, with something of her natural animation.

Presently indeed the voices had sunk so much, and the heads had drawn so close together that Margaret French slipped away, under the impression that they were discussing matters to which she was not meant to listen.

She had hardly closed the door, when Kitty drew herself away from Ashe, and holding his arm with both hands looked strangely into his eyes.

'You're awfully good to me, William. But—you know—you don't tell me secrets!'

'What do you mean, darling?'

'You don't tell me the real secrets—what Lord Palmerston used to tell to Lady Palmerston!'

'How do you know what he used to tell her?' said Ashe, with a laugh. But his forehead had reddened.

'One hears,—and one guesses,—from the letters that have been published. Oh! I understand quite well!—You can't trust me!'

Ashe turned aside and began to gather up his papers.

'Of course!'—said Kitty, a little hoarsely—'I know it's my own fault, because you used to tell me much more. I suppose it was the way I behaved to Lord Parham?'

She looked at him rather tremulously. It was the

first time since her illness began that she had referred to the incidents at Haggart.

'Look here!' said Ashe, in a tone of decision, 'I shall *really* give up talking politics to you, if it only reminds you of disagreeable things.'

She took no notice.

'Is Lord Parham behaving well to you—now—William?'

Ashe coloured hotly. As a matter of fact, in his own opinion, Lord Parham was behaving vilely. A measure of first-rate importance for which he was responsible was already in danger of being practically shelved, simply as it seemed to him from a lack of elementary trustworthiness in Lord Parham. But as to this he had naturally kept his own counsel with Kitty.

'He is not the most agreeable of customers,' he said gaily. 'But I shall get through. Pegging away does it.'

'And then to see how our papers flatter him!' cried Kitty. 'How little people know, who think they know! It would be amusing to show the world the real Lord Parham!'

She looked at her husband with an expression that struck him disagreeably. He threw away his cigarette, and his face changed.

'What we have to do, my dear Kitty, is simply to hold our tongues.'

Kitty sat up in some excitement.

'That man never hears the truth!'

Ashe shrugged his shoulders. It seemed to him incredible that she should pursue this particular topic, after the incidents at Haggart.

'That's not the purpose for which Prime Ministers exist. Anyway *we* can't tell it him.'

Undaunted however by his tone, and with what seemed

to him extraordinary excitability of manner, Kitty reminded him of an incident in the life of a bygone administration, when the near relative of an English statesman, staying at the time in the statesman's house, had sent a communication to one of the Quarterlies, attacking his policy and belittling his character, by means of information obtained in the intimacy of a country-house party.

'One of the most treacherous things ever done!' said Ashe indignantly. 'Fair fight, if you like! But if that kind of thing were to spread, I for one should throw up politics to-morrow.'

'Everyone said it did a vast deal of good,' persisted Kitty.

'A precious sort of good! Yes—I believe Parham in particular profited by it,—more shame to him! If anybody ever tried to help me in that sort of way—anybody that is for whom I felt the smallest responsibility—I know what I should do.'

'What?' Kitty fell back on her cushions, but her eye still held him.

'Send in my resignation by the next post—and damn the fellow that did it! Look here, Kitty!' He came to stand over her,—a fine formidable figure, his hands in his pockets. 'Don't you ever try that kind of thing—there's a darling.'

'Would you damn me?'

She smiled at him—with a tremor of the lip.

He caught up her hand and kissed it. 'Blow out my own brains, more like,' he said laughing. Then he turned away. 'What on earth have we got into this beastly conversation for? Let's get out of it. The Parhams are there—male and female—aren't they?—and we've got to put up with them. Well, I'm going to the Piazza. Any commissions? Oh! by the way'—he looked back at a letter in his hands, 'Mother says Polly Lyster

will probably be here before we go—she seems to be touring around with her father.'

'Charming prospect!' said Kitty. 'Does mother expect me to chaperon her?'

Ashe laughed and went. As soon as he was gone, Kitty sprang from the sofa, and walked up and down the room in a passionate preoccupation. A tremor of great fear was invading her; an agony of unavailing regret.

'What can I do?' she said to herself, as her upper lip twisted and tortured the lower one.

Presently she caught up her purse, went to her room, where she put on her walking things without summoning Blanche, and stealing down the stairs, so as to be unheard by Margaret, she made her way to the back gate of the Palazzo, and so to the streets leading to the Piazza. William had taken the gondola to the Piazzetta, so she felt herself safe.

She entered the telegraphic office at the western end of the Piazza, and sent a telegram to England that nearly emptied her purse of francs. When she came out she was as pale as she had been flushed before,—a little terror-stricken figure, passing in a miserable abstraction through the intricate back-ways which took her home.

'It won't be published for ten days. There's time. It's only a question of money,' she said to herself feverishly,—'only a question of money!'

All the rest of the day, Kitty was at once so restless and so languid that to amuse her was difficult. Ashe was quite grateful to his amazing mother-in-law for the plan of the evening.

As night fell, Kitty started at every sound in the old palazzo. Once or twice she went half-way to the door—eagerly—with hand outstretched—as though she expected a letter.

'No other English post to-night, Kitty!' said Ashe at last, raising his head from the finely printed 'Poetæ Minores' he had just purchased at Ongania's, 'you don't mean to say you're not thankful!'

The evening arrived,—clear and mild, but moonless. Ashe went off to dine with his prince, in the ordinary gondola of commerce, hired at the Traghetto; while Margaret and Kitty followed a little later in one which had already drawn the attention of Venice, owing to the two handsome gondoliers, habited in black from head to foot, who were attached to it. They turned towards the Piazzetta, where they were to meet with Madame d'Estrées's party.

Kitty in her deep mourning, sank listlessly into the black cushions of the gondola. Yet almost as they started, as the first strokes carried them past the famous palace which is now the Prefecture, the spell of Venice began to work.

City of rest!—as it seems to our modern senses,—how is it possible that so busy, so pitiless and covetous a life as history shows us, should have gone to the making and the fashioning of Venice! The easy passage of the gondola through the soft imprisoned wave; the silence of wheel and hoof, of all that hurries and clatters; the tide that comes and goes, noiseless, indispensable, bringing in the freshness of the sea, carrying away the defilements of the land; the narrow winding ways, now firm earth, now shifting sea, that bind the city into one social whole, where the industrial and the noble alike are housed in palaces, equal often in beauty as in decay; the marvellous quiet of the nights, save when the north-east wind, Hadria's stormy leader, drives the furious waves against the palace fronts in the darkness, with the clamour of an attacking host; the languor of the hot afternoons,

when life is a dream of light and green water, when the play of mirage drowns the foundations of the *lidi* in the lagoon, so that trees and buildings rise out of the sea as though some strong Amphion-music were but that moment calling them from the deep; and when day departs, that magic of the swiftly falling dusk, and that white foam and flower of St. Mark's upon the purple intensity of the sky!—through each phase of the hours and the seasons, *rest* is still the message of Venice, rest enriched with endless images, impressions, sensations, that cost no trouble, and breed no pain.

It was this spell of rest that descended for a while on Kitty, as they glided downwards to the Piazzetta. The terror of the day relaxed. Her telegram would be in time; or if not, she would throw herself into William's arms, and he *must* forgive her!—because she was so foolish and weak, so tired and sad. She slipped her hand into Margaret's; they talked in low voices of the child, and Kitty was all appealing melancholy and charm.

At the Piazzetta there was already a crowd of gondolas, and at their head the *barca*, which carried the musicians.

'You are late, Kitty!' cried Madame d'Estrées, waving to them. 'Shall we draw out and come to you?—or will you just join on where you are?'

For the Vercelli gondola was already wedged into a serried line of boats in the wake of the *barca*.

'Never mind us!' said Kitty. 'We'll tack on somehow.'

And inwardly she was delighted to be thus separated from her mother and the chattering crowd by which Madame d'Estrées seemed to be surrounded. Kitty and Margaret bade their men fall in, and they presently found themselves on the Salute side of the floating audience, their prow pointing to the Canal.

The *barca* began to move, and the mass of gondolas followed. Round them, and behind them, other boats were passing and repassing, each with its slim black body, its swan-like motion, its poised oarsman, and its twinkling light. The lagoon towards the Giudecca was alive with these lights; and a magnificent white steamer adorned with flags and lanterns, the yacht, indeed, of a German prince, shone in the mid-channel.

On they floated. Here were the hotels, with other illuminated boats in front of their steps, whence spoilt voices shouted 'Santa Lucia,' till even Venice and the Grand Canal became a vulgarity and a weariness. These were the 'Serenate publiche,' common and commercial affairs, which the private Serenata left behind in contempt, steering past their flaring lights for the dark waters of romance which lay beyond.

Suddenly Kitty's sadness gave way; her starved senses clamoured; she woke to poetry and pleasure. All round her stretching almost across the Canal, the noiseless flock of gondolas,—dark leaning figures impelling them from behind, and in front the high prows and glow-worm lights; in the boats, a multitude of dim shrouded figures, with not a face visible; and in their midst the *barca*, temple of light and music, built up of flowers, and fluttering scarves and many-coloured lanterns, a sparkling fantasy of colour, rose and gold and green, shining on the bosom of the night. To either side, the long dark lines of thrice-historic palaces; scarcely a poor light here and there at their water-gates; and now and then the lamps of the Traghetti . . . Otherwise, darkness, soundless motion, and, overhead, dim stars.

'Margaret! look!'

Kitty caught her companion's arm in a mad delight.

Someone for the amusement of the guests of Venice was experimenting on the top of the Campanile of St.

Mark's with those electric lights, which were then the toys of science, and are now the eyes and tools of war. A search-light was playing on the basin of St. Mark's and on the mouth of the Canal. Suddenly it caught the Church of the Salute;—and the whole vast building, from the Queen of Heaven on its topmost dome, down to the water's brim, the figures of Saints and Prophets and Apostles which crowd its steps and ledges, the white whorls, like huge sea-shells, that make its buttresses, the curves and volutes of its cornices and doorways, rushed upon the eye in a white and blinding splendour, making the very darkness out of which the vision sprang alive and rich. Not a Christian church, surely, but a palace of Poseidon! The bewildered gazer saw naiads and bearded sea-gods in place of angels and saints, and must needs imagine the champing of Poseidon's horses at the marble steps, straining towards the sea.

The vision wavered, faded, reappeared, and finally died upon the night. Then the wild beams began to play on the Canal, following the Serenata, lighting up now the palaces on either hand, now some single gondola, revealing every figure and gesture of the laughing English or Americans who filled it, in a hard white flash:—

'Oh! listen, Kitty!' said Margaret. 'Someone is going to sing "Che farò."'

Miss French was very musical, and she turned in a trance of pleasure towards the *barca* whence came the first bars of the accompaniment.

She did not see meanwhile that Kitty had made a hurried movement, and was now leaning over the side of the gondola, peering with arrested breath into the scattered group of boats on their left hand. The search-light flashed here and there among them. A gondola at the very edge of the Serenata contained one figure beside the gondolier, a man in a large cloak and slouch hat,

sitting very still with folded arms. As Kitty looked, hearing the beating of her heart, their own boat was suddenly lit up. The light passed in a second, and while it lasted, those in the flash could see nothing outside it. When it withdrew all was in darkness. The black mass of boats floated on, soundless again, save for an occasional plash of water, or the hoarse cry of a gondolier,—and in the distance the wail for Eurydice.

Kitty fell back in her seat. An excitement, from which she shrank in a kind of terror, possessed her. Her thoughts were wholly absorbed by the gondola and the figure she could no longer distinguish,—for which, whenever a group of lamps threw their reflections on the water, she searched the Canal in vain. If what she madly dreamed were true, had she herself been seen—and recognised?

The 'Serenata' in honour of Italy's beautiful Princess duly made its way up the Grand Canal. The Princess came to her balcony, while the 'Jewel Song' in 'Faust,' was being sung below, and there was a demonstration which echoed from palace to palace, and died away under the arch of the Rialto. Then the gondolas dispersed. That of Lady Kitty Ashe had some difficulty in making its way home against a force of wind and tide coming from the lagoon.

Kitty was apparently asleep when Ashe returned. He had sat late with his hosts,—men prominent in the Risorgimento, and in the politics of the new Kingdom,—discussing the latest intricacies of the Roman situation, and the prospects of Italian finance. His mind was all alert and vigorous, ranging over great questions, and delighting in its own strength. To come in contact with these able foreigners, not as the mere traveller, but as an important member of an English Government, beginning

to be spoken of by the world as one of the two or three men of the future,—this was a new experience and a most agreeable one. Doors hitherto closed had opened before him; information no casual Englishman could have commanded had been freely poured out for him; last but not least, he had at length made himself talk French with some fluency, and he looked back on his performance of the evening with a boy's complacency.

For the rest, Venice was a mere trial of his patience! As his gondola brought him home, struggling with wind and wave, Ashe had no eye whatever for the beauty of this Venice in storm. His mind was in England, in London, wrestling with a hundred difficulties and possibilities. The old literary and speculative habit was fast disappearing in the stress of action and success. His well-worn Plato or Horace still lay beside his bedside; but when he woke early, and lit a candle carefully shaded from Kitty, it was not to the poets and philosophers that he turned; it was to a heap of official documents and reports, to the letters of political friends, or an unfinished letter of his own, the phrases of which had perhaps been running through his dreams. The measures for which he was wrestling against the intrigues of Lord Parham and Lord Parham's clique, filled all his mind with a lively ardour of battle. They were the children,—the darlings—of his thoughts.

Nevertheless, as he entered his wife's dim-lit room, the eager arguments and considerations that were running through his head died away. He stood beside her, overwhelmed by a rush of feeling, alive through all his being to the appeal of her frail sweetness, the helplessness of her sleep, the dumb significance of the thin blue-veined hand,—eloquent at once of character, and of physical weakness,—which lay beside her. Her face was hidden, but the beautiful hair with its childish curls and

ripples drew him to her,—touched all the springs of tenderness.

It was a loveliness so full, it seemed, of meaning, and of promise. Hand, brow, mouth,—they were the signs of no mere empty and insipid beauty. There was not a movement, not a feature that did not speak of intelligence and mind.

And yet, were he to wake her now, and talk to her of the experience of his evening, how little joy would either get out of it!

Was it because she had no intellectual disinterestedness? Well, what woman had! But other women, even if they saw everything in terms of personality, had the power of pursuing an aim, steadily, persistently, for the sake of a person. He thought of Lady Palmerston—of Princess Lieven fighting Guizot's battles,—and sighed.

By Jove—the women could do most things, if they chose! He recalled Kitty's triumph in the great party gathered to welcome Lord Parham, contrasting it with her wilful and absurd behaviour to the man himself. There was something bewildering in such power,—combined with such folly. In a sense, it was perfectly true that she had insulted her husband's chief, and jeopardised her husband's policy, because she could not put up with Lord Parham's white eyelashes.

Well, let him make his account with it! How to love her, tend her, make her happy,—and yet carry on himself the life of high office,—there was the problem! Meanwhile he recognised, fully and humorously, that she had married a political sceptic,—and that it was hard for her to know what to do with the enthusiast who had taken his place.

Poor, pretty, incalculable darling! He would coax her to stay abroad part of the Parliamentary season,—and then perhaps lure her into the country, with the

re-building and re-furnishing of Haggart. She must be managed and kept from harm,—and afterwards indulged and spoilt and fêted to her heart's content.

If only the fates would give them another child!—a child brilliant and lovely like herself, then surely this melancholy which overshadowed her would disperse. That look—that tragic look—she had given him on the day of the *fête*, when she spoke of 'separation'! The wild adventure with the lamp had been her revenge,—her despair. He shuddered as he thought of it.

He fell asleep, still pondering restlessly over her future and his own. Amid all his anxieties he never stooped to recollect the man who had endangered her name and peace. His optimism, his pride, the sanguine perfunctoriness of much of his character were all shown in the omission.

Kitty, however, was not asleep, while Ashe was beside her. And she slept but little through the hours that followed. Between three and four she was finally roused by the sounds of storm in the Canal. It was as though a fleet of gigantic steamers—in days when Venice knew but the gondola,—were passing outside, sending a mountainous 'wash' against the walls of the old palace in which they lodged. In this languid autumnal Venice, the sudden noise and crash were startling. Kitty sprang softly out of bed, flung on a dressing-gown and fur cloak, and slipped through the open window to the balcony.

A strange sight! Beneath, livid waves, lashing the marble walls; above, a pale moonlight, obscured by scudding clouds. Not a sign of life on the water, or in the dark palaces opposite; Venice looked precisely as she might have looked on some wild sixteenth-century night in the years of her glorious decay, when her palaces were still building and her state tottering. Opposite, at the

Traghetto of the Accademia, there were lamps, and a few lights in the gondolas; and through the storm-noises one could hear the tossed boats grinding on their posts.

The riot of the air was not cold; there was still a recollection of summer in the gusts that beat on Kitty's fair hair and wrestled with her cloak. As she clung to the balcony she pictured to herself the tumbling waves on the Lido; the piled storm-clouds parting like a curtain above a dead Venice; and behind, the gleaming eternal Alps, sending their challenge to the sea,—the forces that make the land, to the forces that engulf it.

Her wild fancy went out to meet the tumult of blast and wave. She felt herself, as it were, anchored a moment at sea, in the midst of a war of elements, physical and moral.

Yes, yes!—it was Geoffrey. Once, under the skipping light, she had seen the face distinctly. Paler than of old,—gaunt, unhappy, absent. It was the face of one who had suffered—in body and mind. But—she trembled through all her slight frame!—the old harsh power was there unchanged.

Had he seen and recognised her?—slipping away afterwards into the mouth of a side canal, or dropping behind in the darkness? Was he ashamed to face her?—or angered by the reminder of her existence? No doubt it seemed to him now a monstrous absurdity that he should ever have said he loved her! He despised her,—thought her a base and coward soul. Very likely he would make it up with Mary Lyster now, accept her nursing and her money.

Her lip curled in scorn. No, *that* she didn't believe! Well, then, what would be his future? His name had been but little in the newspapers during the preceding year; the big public seemed to have forgotten him. A cloud had hung for months over the struggle of races and

of faiths now passing in the Balkans. Obscure fighting in obscure mountains; massacre here, revolt there; and for some months now, hardly an accredited voice from Turk or Christian to tell the world what was going on.

But Geoffrey had now emerged,—and at a moment when Europe was beginning perforce to take notice of what she had so far wilfully ignored. *A lui la parole!* No doubt he was preparing it, the bloody exciting story, which would bring him before the footlights again, and make him once more the lion of a day. More social flatteries, more doubtful love-affairs! Fools like herself would feel his spell, would cherish and caress him, only to be stung and scathed as she had been. The bitter lines of his 'portrait' rung in her ears,—blackening and discrowning her in her own eyes.

She abhorred him!—but the thought that he was in Venice burnt deep into senses and imagination. Should she tell William she had seen him? No, no!—She would stand by herself, protect herself!

So she stole back to bed, and lay there wakeful, starting guiltily at William's every movement. If he knew what had happened!—what she was thinking of! Why on earth should he? It would be monstrous to harass him on his holiday—with all these political affairs on his mind.

Then suddenly—by an association of ideas—she sat up shivering, her hands pressed to her breast. The telegram—the book! Oh, but *of course* she had been in time!—*of course*! Why she had offered the man two hundred pounds! She lay down laughing at herself—forcing herself to try and sleep.

CHAPTER XIX

Sir Richard Lyster unfolded his 'Times' with a jerk.

'A beastly rheumatic hole I call this,' he said, looking angrily at the window of his hotel sitting-room, which showed drops from a light shower then passing across the lagoon. 'And the dilatoriness of these Italian posts is upon my soul, beyond bearing! This "Times" is *three* days old.'

Mary Lyster looked up from the letter she was writing.

'Why don't you read the French papers, Papa? I saw a "Figaro" of yesterday in the Piazza this morning.'

'Because I can't!' was the indignant reply. 'There wasn't the same amount of money squandered on *my* education, my dear, that there has been on yours.'

Mary smiled a little, unseen. Her father had been of course at Eton. She had been educated by a succession of small and hunted governesses, mostly Swiss, whose remuneration had certainly counted among the frugalities rather than the extravagances of the family budget.

Sir Richard read his 'Times' for a while. Mary continued to write cheques for the board wages of the servants left at home, and to give directions for the beating of carpets and cleaning of curtains. It was dull work, and she detested it.

Presently Sir Richard rose, with a stretch. He was a tall old man with a shock of white hair, and very black eyes. A victim to certain obscure forms of gout, he was in character neither stupid, nor inhuman, but he suffered

from the usual drawbacks of his class,—too much money, and too few ideas. He came abroad every year, reluctantly. He did not choose to be left behind by county neighbours whose wives talked nonsense about Botticelli. And Mary would have it. But Sir Richard's tours were generally one prolonged course of battle between himself and all foreign institutions; and if it was Mary who drove him forth, it was Mary also who generally hurried him home.

'Who was it you saw last night in that ridiculous singing affair?' he asked, as he put the fire together.

'Kitty Ashe—and her mother,' said Mary,—after a moment,— still writing.

'Her mother!—what, that disreputable woman?'

'They weren't in the same gondola.'

'Ashe will be a great fool if he lets his wife see much of that woman! By all accounts Lady Kitty is quite enough of a handful already. By the way, have you found out where they are?'

'On the Grand Canal. Shall we call this afternoon?'

'I don't mind. Of course I think Ashe is doing an immense amount of harm.'

'Well, you can tell him so,' said Mary.

Sir Richard frowned. His daughter's manners seemed to him at times abrupt.

'Why do you see so little now of Elizabeth Tranmore?' he asked her with a sharp look.—'You used to be always there. And I don't believe you even write to her much now.'

'Does she see much of anybody?'

'Because, you mean, of Tranmore's condition? What good can she be to him now? He knows nobody.'

'She doesn't seem to ask the question,' said Mary drily.

A queer soft look came over Sir Richard's old face.

'No, the women don't,' he said, half to himself, and fell into a little reverie. He emerged from it with the remark,—accompanied by a smile, a little sly but not unkind,—

'I always used to hope, Polly, that you and Ashe would have made it up!'

'I'm sure I don't know why,' said Mary, fastening up her envelopes. As she did so it crossed her father's mind that she was still very good-looking. Her dress of dark-blue cloth, the plain fashion of her brown hair, her oval face and well-marked features, her plump and pretty hands, were all pleasant to look upon. She had rather a hard way with her, though, at times. The servants were always giving warning. And personally, he was much fonder of his younger daughter, whom Mary considered foolish and improvident. But he was well aware that Mary made his life easy.

'Well, you were always on excellent terms,' he said, in answer to her last remark. 'I remember his saying to me once that you were very good company. The Bishop too used to notice how he liked to talk to you.'

When Mary and her father were together, 'the Bishop' was Sir Richard's property. He only fell to Mary's share, in the old man's absence.

Mary coloured slightly.

'Oh yes, we got on,' she said; counting her letters the while with a quick hand.

'Well, I hope that young woman whom he *did* marry is now behaving herself. It was that fellow Cliffe, with whom the scandal was last year, wasn't it?'

'There was a good deal of talk,' said Mary.

'A rum fellow, that Cliffe! A man at the Club told me last week it is believed he has been fighting for these Bosnian rebels for months. Shocking bad form I call it. If the Turks catch him, they'll string him up. And quite

right too. What's he got to do with other people's quarrels?'

'If the Turks will be such brutes——

'Nonsense, my dear! Don't you believe any of this Radical stuff. The Turks are awfully fine fellows—fight like bulldogs. And as for the 'atrocities,' they make them up in London. Oh! of course what Cliffe wants is notoriety—we all know that. Well, I'm going out to see if I can find another English paper. Beastly climate!'

But as Sir Richard turned again to the window, he was met by a burst of sunshine, which hit him gaily in the face like a child's impertinence. He grumbled something unintelligible, as Mary put him into his Inverness cape, took hat and stick and departed.

Mary sat still beside the writing-table, her hands crossed on her lap, her eyes absently bent upon them.

She was thinking of the Serenata. She had followed it with an acquaintance from the hotel, and she had seen not only Kitty, and Madame d'Estrées, but also—the solitary man in the heavy cloak. She knew quite well that Cliffe was in Venice; though true to her secretive temper, she had not mentioned the fact to her father.

Of course he was in Venice on Kitty's account. It would be too absurd to suppose that he was here by mere coincidence. Mary believed that nothing but the intervention of Cliffe's mighty kinsman from the north had saved the situation the year before. Kitty would certainly have betrayed her husband, but for the *force majeure* arrayed against her. And now the magnate who had played Providence slumbered in the family vault. He had passed away in the spring, full of years and honours, leaving Cliffe some money. The path was clear. As for the escapade in the Balkans, Geoffrey was of course tired of it. A sensational book, hurried out to meet the public appetite for horrors,—and the pursuance of his intrigue

with Lady Kitty Ashe,—Mary was calmly certain that these were now his objects. He was no doubt writing his book; and meeting Kitty where he could. Ashe would soon have to go home. And then! As if that girl Margaret French could stop it!

Well, William had only got his deserts! But as her thoughts passed from Kitty or Cliffe to William Ashe, their quality changed. Hatred and bitterness, scorn or wounded vanity, passed into something gentler. She fell into recollections of Ashe, as he had appeared on that bygone afternoon in May, when he came back triumphant from his election, with the world before him. If he had never seen Kitty Bristol?—

'I should have made him a good wife,' she said to herself. '*I* should have known how to be proud of him.'

And there emerged also the tragic consciousness that if the Fates had given him to her, she might have been another woman,—taught by happiness, by love, by motherhood.

It was that little heartless creature who had snatched them both from her,—William, and Geoffrey Cliffe,—the higher and the lower,—the man who might have ennobled her,—and the man, half charlatan, half genius, whom she might have served and raised, by her fortune and her abilities. Her life might have been so full, so interesting! And it was Kitty that had made it flat, and cold, and futureless.

Poor William! Had he really liked her, in those boy-and-girl days? She dreamed over their old cousinly relations,—over the presents he had sometimes given her.—

Then a thought, like a burning arrow, pierced her. Her hands locked, straining one against the other. If this intrigue were indeed renewed,—if Geoffrey succeeded in tempting Kitty from her husband,—why then—then—

She shivered before the images that were passing through her mind, and rising, she put away her letters, and rang for the waiter, to order dinner.

'Where shall we go?' said Kitty, languidly, putting down the French novel she was reading.

'Mr. Ashe suggested San Lazzaro.' Margaret looked up from her writing as Kitty moved towards her. 'The rain seems to have all cleared off.'

'Well, I'm sure it doesn't matter where,' said Kitty, and was turning away; but Margaret caught her hands and caressed it.

'Naughty Kitty! why this sea air can't put some more colour into your cheeks, I don't understand.'

'I'm *not* pale!' cried Kitty, pouting. 'Margaret, you do croak about me so! If you say any more I'll go and rouge till you'll be ashamed to go out with me—there! Where's William?'

William opened the door as she spoke, the 'Gazetta di Venezia' in one hand, and a telegram in the other.

'Something for you, darling,' he said, holding it out to Kitty. 'Shall I open it?'

'Oh, no!' said Kitty, hastily. 'Give it me. It's from my Paris woman.'

'Ah—ha!' laughed Ashe. 'Some extravagance you want to keep to yourself, I'll be bound. I've a good mind to see!'

And he teasingly held it up above her head. But she gave a little jump, caught it and ran off with it to her room.

'Much regret impossible stop publication. Fifty copies distributed already. Writing.'

She dropped speechless on the edge of her bed, the crumpled telegram in her hand. The minutes passed.

'When will you be ready?' said Ashe, tapping at the door.

'Is the gondola there?'

'Waiting at the steps.'

'Five minutes!' Ashe departed. She rose, tore the telegram into little bits and began with deliberation to put on her mantle and hat.

'You've got to go through with it,' she said to the white face in the glass, and she straightened her small shoulders defiantly.

They were bound for the Armenian convent. It was a misty day, with shafts of light on the lagoon. The storm had passed, but the water was still rough, and the clouds seemed to be withdrawing their forces only to marshal them again with the darkness. A day of sudden bursts of watery light, of bands of purple distance struck into enchanting beauty by the red or orange of a sail, of a wild salt breath in air that seemed to be still suffused with spray. The Alps were hidden; but what sun there was played faintly on the Euganean hills.

'I say, Margaret, at last she does us some credit!' said Ashe, pointing to his wife.

Margaret started. Was it rouge?—or was it the strong air? Kitty's languor had entirely disappeared; she was more cheerful and more talkative than she had been at any time since their arrival. She chattered about the current scandals of Venice,—the mysterious Contessa who lived in the palace opposite their own, and only went out, in deep mourning, at night, because she had been the love of a Russian Grand-Duke, and the Grand-Duke was dead; of the Carlist pretender and his wife, who had been very popular in Venice until they took it into their heads to require royal honours, and Venice, taking time to think, had lazily decided the game was not worth the candle,—so now the sulky pair went about alone in a fine gondola, turning glassy eyes on their former

acquaintance; of the needy Marchese who had sold a Titian to the Louvre, and had then found himself boycotted by all his kinsfolk in Venice who were not needy and had no Titians to sell;—all these tales Kitty reeled out at length, till the handsome gondoliers marvelled at the little lady's vivacity, and the queer brightness of her eyes.

'Gracious, Kitty, where do you get all these stories from!' cried Ashe, when the chatter paused for a moment.

He looked at her with delight, rejoicing in her gaiety, the slight touches of white which to-day for the first time relieved the sombreness of her dress, the return of her colour. And Margaret wondered again how much of it was rouge.

At the Armenian convent, a handsome young monk took charge of them. As George Sand and Lamennais had done before them, they looked at the printing-press, the garden, the cloister, the church; they marvelled lazily at the cleanliness and brightness of the place; and finally they climbed to the library and museum, and the room close by where Byron played at grammar-making. In this room Ashe fell suddenly into a political talk with the young monk, who was an ardent and patriotic son of the most unfortunate of nations, and they passed out and down the stairs, followed by Margaret French, not noticing that Kitty had lingered behind.

Kitty stood idly by the window of Byron's room, thinking restlessly of verses that were not Byron's, though there was in them, clothed in forms of the new age, the spirit of Byronic passion, and more than a touch of Byronic affectation;—thinking also of the morning's telegram. Supposing Darrell's prophecy, which had seemed to her so absurd came true, that the book did William harm, not good?—that he ceased to love her?—that he cast her off? . . .

. . . A plash of water outside,—and a voice giving

directions. From the lagoon towards Malamocco a gondola approached. A gentleman and lady were seated in it. The lady,—a very handsome Italian, with a loud laugh and brilliant eyes,—carried a scarlet parasol. Kitty gave a stifled cry, as she drew back. She fled out of the room, and overtook the other two.

'May we go back into the garden a little?' she said hurriedly to the monk who was talking to William. 'I should like to see the view towards Venice.'

William held up a watch, to show that there was but just time to get back to the Piazza for lunch. Kitty persisted, and the monk understanding what the impetuous young lady wished, good-naturedly turned to obey her.

'We must be *very* quick!' said Kitty. 'Take us please to the edge, beyond the trees.'

And she herself hurried through the garden to its further side, where it was bounded by the lagoon.

The others followed her, rather puzzled by her caprice.

'Not much to be seen, darling!' said Ashe, as they reached the water—'and I think this good man wants to get rid of us!'

And indeed the monk was looking backward across the intervening trees at a party which had just entered the garden.

'Ah! they have found another Brother!' he said politely, and he began to point out to Kitty the various landmarks visible, the arsenal, the two asylums, San Pietro di Castello.

The new-comers just glanced at the garden apparently, as the Ashes had done on arrival, and promptly followed their guide back into the convent.

Kitty asked a few more questions, then led the way in a hasty return to the garden door, the entrance hall, and the steps where their gondola was waiting. Nothing

was to be seen of the second party. They had passed on into the cloisters.

Animation, oddity, inconsequence, all these things Margaret observed in Kitty during luncheon in a restaurant of the Merceria, and various incidents connected with it; animation above all. The Ashes fell in with acquaintance, —a fashionable and harassed mother, on the fringe of the Archangels, accompanied by two daughters, one pretty and one plain, and sore pressed by their demands real or supposed. The parents were not rich, but the girls had to be dressed, taken abroad, produced at country houses, at Ascot and the opera, like all other girls. The eldest girl, a considerable beauty, was an accomplished egotist at nineteen, and regarded her mother as a rather inefficient *dame de compagnie*. Kitty understood this young lady perfectly, and after luncheon, over her cigarette, her little, sharp, probing questions gave the beauty twenty minutes' annoyance. Then appeared a young man, ill-dressed, red-haired, and shy. Carelessly as he greeted the mother and daughters, his entrance however transformed them. The mother forgot fatigue; the beauty ceased to yawn; the younger girl who had been making surreptitious notes of Kitty's costume in the last leaf of her guide-book, developed a charming gush. He was the owner of the Magellan estates and the historic Magellan Castle; a professed hater of 'absurd womankind,' and, in general, a hunted and self-conscious person. Kitty gave him one finger, looked him up and down, asked him whether he was yet engaged, and when he laughed an embarrassed 'No,' told him that he would certainly die in the arms of the Magellan housekeeper.

This got a smile out of him. He sat down beside her, and the two laughed and talked with a freedom which presently drew the attention of the neighbouring tables,

and made Ashe uncomfortable. He rose, paid the bill, and succeeded in carrying the whole party off to the Piazza in search of coffee. But here again Kitty's extravagances, the provocation of her light loveliness, as she sat toying with a fresh cigarette and 'chaffing' Lord Magellan, drew a disagreeable amount of notice from the Italians passing by.

'Mother, let's go!' said the angry beauty imperiously in her mother's ear,—'I don't like to be seen with Lady Kitty! She's impossible!'

And with cold farewells the three ladies departed. Then Kitty sprang up, and threw away her cigarette.

'How those girls bully their mother!' she said with scorn. 'However, it serves her right.—I'm sure she bullied hers,—Well, now we must go and do something. Ta-ta!'—

Lord Magellan, to whom she offered another casual finger, wanted to know why he was dismissed. If they were going sight-seeing, might he not come with them?

'Oh, no!' said Kitty calmly. 'Sight-seeing with people you don't really know is too trying to the temper. Even with one's best friend it's risky.'

'Where are you? May I call?' said the young man.

'We're always out,' was Kitty's careless reply. 'But'—

She considered,—

'Would you like to see the Palazzo Vercelli?'

'That magnificent place on the Grand Canal? Very much.'

'Meet me there to-morrow afternoon,'—said Kitty. 'Four o'clock.'

'Delighted!'—said Lord Magellan, making a note on his shirt-cuff; 'and who lives there?'

'My mother,' said Kitty abruptly, and walked away.

Ashe followed her in discomfort. This young man was the son of a certain Lady Magellan, an intimate friend of Lady Tranmore's,—one of the noblest women of her generation, pure, high-minded, spiritual, to whom neither an ugly word nor thought were possible. It annoyed him that either he or Kitty should be introducing *her* son to Madame d'Estrées.

It was really tiresome of Kitty! Rich young men with characters yet indeterminate were not to be lightly brought in contact with Madame d'Estrées. Kitty could not be ignorant of it—poor child! It had been one of her reckless strokes, and Ashe was conscious of a sharp annoyance.

However, he said nothing. He followed his companions from church to church, till pictures became an abomination to him. Then he pleaded letters, and went to the club.

'Will you call on Maman to-morrow?' said Kitty as he turned away, looking at him a little askance.

She knew that he had disapproved of her invitation to Lord Magellan. Why had she given it? She didn't know. There seemed to be a kind of revived mischief and fever in the blood, driving her to these foolish and ill-considered things.

Ashe met her question with a shake of the head, and the remark, in a decided tone, that he should be too busy.

Privately he thought it a piece of impertinence that Madame d'Estrées should expect either Kitty or himself to appear in her drawing-room at all. That this implied a complete transformation of his earlier attitude he was well aware; he accepted it with a curious philosophy. When he and Kitty first met, he had never troubled his head about such things. If a woman amused or interested him in Society, so long as

his taste was satisfied, she might have as much or as little character as she pleased. It stirred his mocking sense of English hypocrisy that the point should be even raised. But now,—how can any individual, he asked himself, with political work to do, affect to despise the opinions and prejudices of Society? A politician with great reforms to put through, will make no friction round him that he can avoid,—unless he is a fool. It weighed sorely therefore on his present mind that Madame d'Estrées was in Venice,—that she was a person of blemished repute,—that he must be and was ashamed of her. It would have been altogether out of consonance with his character to put any obstacle in the way of Kitty's seeing her mother. But he chafed as he had never yet chafed under the humiliation of his relationship to the notorious Margaret Fitzgerald of the forties, who had been old Blackwater's *chère amie* before she married him, and, as Lady Blackwater, had sacrificed her innocent and defenceless step-daughter, to one of her own lovers, in order to secure for him the step-daughter's fortune,—black and dastardly deed!

Was it all part of the general growth and concentration that any shrewd observer might have read in William Ashe?—the pressure,—enormous, unseen,—of the traditional English ideals, English standards, asserting itself at last in a brilliant and paradoxical nature? It had been so,—conspicuously,—in the case of one of his political predecessors. Lord Melbourne had begun his career as a person of idle habits and imprudent adventures, much given to coarse conversation, and unable to say the simplest thing without an oath. He ended it as the man of scrupulous dignity, tact, and delicacy, who moulded the innocent youth of a girl-queen, to his own lasting honour, and England's gratitude. In ways less striking, the same influence of vast responsibilities was

perhaps acting upon William Ashe. It had already made him a sterner, tougher, and,—no doubt,—a greater man.

The defection of William only left Kitty, it seemed, still more greedy of things to see and do. Innumerable sacristans opened all possible doors, and unveiled all possible pictures. Bellini succeeded Tintoret, and Carpaccio Bellini. The two sable gondoliers wore themselves out in Kitty's service, and Margaret's kind round face grew more and more puzzled and distressed. And whence this strange impression that the whole experience was a *flight* on Kitty's part?—or, rather, that throughout it she was always eagerly expecting, or eagerly escaping from some unknown unseen pursuer? A glance behind her—a start—a sudden shivering gesture in the shadows of dark churches—these things suggested it, till Margaret herself was caught by the same suppressed excitement that seemed to be alive in Kitty. Did it all point merely to some mental state,—to the nervous effects of her illness and her loss?

When they reached home about five o'clock, Kitty was naturally tired out Margaret put her on the sofa, gave her tea, and tended her, hoping that she might drop asleep before dinner. But just as tea was over, and Kitty was lying curled up, silent and white, with that brooding look which kept Margaret's anxiety about her constantly alive, there was a sudden sound of voices in the ante-room outside.

'Margaret!' cried Kitty, starting up in dismay,—'say I'm not at home.'

Too late! Their smiling Italian housemaid threw the door open, with the air of one bringing good fortune. And behind her appeared a tall lady, and an old gentleman hat in hand.

'May we come in, Kitty?' said Mary Lyster advancing. 'Cousin Elizabeth told us you were here.'

Kitty had sprung up. The disorder of her fair hair, her white cheeks, and the ghostly thinness of her small black-robed form drew the curious eyes of Sir Richard. And the oddness of her manner as she greeted them, only confirmed the old man's prejudice against her.

However, greeted they were, in some sort of fashion; and Miss French gave them tea. She kept Sir Richard entertained, while Kitty and Mary conversed. They talked perfunctorily of ordinary topics,—Venice, its sights, its hotels, and the people staying in them,—of Lady Tranmore and various Ashe relations. Meanwhile the inmost thought of each was busy with the other.

Kitty studied the lines of Mary's face, and the fashion of her dress.

'She looks much older. And she's not enjoying her life a bit. That's my fault. I spoilt all her chances with Geoffrey,—and she knows it. She *hates* me. Quite right too.'—

'Oh, you mean that nonsensical thing last night?' Sir Richard was saying to Margaret French. 'Oh! no I didn't go. But Mary of course thought she must go. Somebody invited her.'

Kitty started.

'You were at the Serenata?' she said to Mary.

'Yes, I went with a party from the hotel.'

Kitty looked at her. A sudden flush had touched her pale cheeks, and she could not conceal the trembling of her hands.

'That was marvellous, that light on the Salute, wasn't it?'

'Wonderful!—and on the water too. I saw two or three people I knew—just caught their faces for a second.'

'Did you?' said Kitty. And thoughts ran fast through her head. 'Did she see Geoffrey?—and does she mean me to understand that she did? How she detests me! If she did see him, of course she supposes that I know all about it, and that he's here for me. Why don't I ask her, straight out, whether she saw him, and make her understand that I don't care twopence?—that she's welcome to him!—as far as I'm concerned?'

But some hidden feeling tied her tongue. Mary continued to talk about the Serenata, and Kitty was presently conscious that her every word and gesture in reply was closely watched. 'Yes, yes, she saw him! Perhaps she'll tell William,—or write home to mother?'

And in her excitement, she began to chatter fast and loudly, mostly to Sir Richard—repeating some of the Venice tales she had told in the gondola,—with much inconsequence and extravagance. The old man listened, his hands on his stick, his eyes on the ground, the expression on his strong mouth hostile or sarcastic. It was a relief to everybody when Ashe's step was heard stumbling up the dark stairs, and the door opened on his friendly and courteous presence.

'Why, Polly!—and Cousin Richard! I wondered where you had hidden yourselves.'

Mary's bright involuntary smile transformed her. Ashe sat down beside her, and they were soon deep in all sorts of gossip—relations, acquaintance, politics, and what not. All Mary's stiffness disappeared. She became the elegant, agreeable woman, of whom dinner-parties were glad. Ashe plunged into the pleasant malice of her talk, which ranged through the good and evil fortunes—mostly the latter,—of half his acquaintance; discussed the debts, the love-affairs and the follies of his political colleagues or parliamentary foes; how the Foreign Secretary had been getting on at Balmoral,—how so-and-so

had been ruined at the Derby, and restored to sanity and solvency by the Oaks,—how Lady Parham at Hatfield had been made to know her place, by the French Ambassador—and the like; passing thereby a charming half-hour.

Meanwhile Kitty, Margaret French, and Sir Richard kept up intermittent remarks, pausing at every other phrase to gather the crumbs that fell from the table of the other two.

Kitty was very weary, and a dead weight had fallen on her spirits. If Sir Richard had thought her bad form ten minutes before, his unspoken mind now declared her stupid. Meanwhile, Kitty was saying to herself, as she watched her husband and Mary,—

'I used to amuse William just as well—last year!'

When the door closed on them, Kitty fell back on her cushions with an 'ouf!' of relief. William came back in a few minutes from showing the visitors the back way to their hotel, and stood beside his wife with an anxious face.

'They were too much for you, darling. They stayed too long.'

'How you and Mary chattered!' said Kitty with a little pout. But at the same moment she slipped an appealing hand into his.

Ashe clasped the hand, and laughed.

'I always told you she was an excellent gossip.'

Sir Richard and Mary pursued their way through the narrow *calles* that led to the Piazza. Sir Richard was expatiating on Ashe's folly in marrying such a wife.

'She looks like an actress!—and as to her conversation, she began by telling me outrageous stories, and ended by not having a word to say about anything. The bad blood of the Bristols, it seems to me, without their brains.'

'Oh, no, Papa! Kitty is very clever. You haven't heard her recite. She was tired to-night.'

'Well, I don't want to flatter you, my dear!' said the old man testily—'but I thought it was pathetic—the way in which Ashe enjoyed your conversation. It showed he didn't get much of it at home.'

Mary smiled uncertainly. Her whole nature was still aglow from that contact with Ashe's delightful personality. After months of depression and humiliation, her success with him had somehow restored those illusions on which cheerfulness depends.

How ill Kitty looked—and how conscious! Mary was impetuously certain that Kitty had betrayed her knowledge of Cliffe's presence in Venice; and equally certain that William knew nothing. Poor William!

Well, what can you expect of such a temperament—such a race? Mary's thoughts travelled confusedly towards—and through—some big and dreadful catastrophe.

And then? After it?

It seemed to her that she was once more in the Park Lane drawing-room; the familiar Morris papers and Burne-Jones' drawings surrounded her; and she and Elizabeth Tranmore sat, hand in hand, talking of William—a William, once more free, after much folly and suffering, to reconstruct his life. . . .

'Here we are,' said Sir Richard Lyster, moving down a dark passage towards the brightly lit doorway of their hotel.

With a start—as of one taken red-handed,—Mary awoke from her dream.

CHAPTER XX

MADAME D'ESTRÉES, and her friend Donna Laura occupied the *mezzanino* of the vast Vercelli palace. The palace itself belonged to the head of the Vercelli family. It was a magnificent erection of the late seventeenth century, at this moment half furnished, dilapidated and forsaken. But the *entresol* on the eastern side of the *cortile* was in good condition, and comfortably fitted up for the occasional use of the Principe. As he was wintering in Paris he had let his rooms at an ordinary commercial rent to his kinswoman Donna Laura. She, a soured and melancholy woman, unmarried in a Latin society which has small use or kindness for spinsters, had seized on Marguerite d'Estrées—whose acquaintance she had made in a Mont d'Or hotel—and was now keeping her like a caged canary, who sings for its food.

Madame d'Estrées was quite willing. So long as she had a sofa on which to sit enthroned, a sufficiency of new gowns, a maid, cigarettes, breakfast in bed, and a supply of French novels, she appeared the most harmless and engaging of mortals. Her youth had been cruel, disorderly and vicious. It had lasted long; but now when middle age stood at last confessed, she was lapsing, it seemed, into amiability and good behaviour. She was indeed fast forgetting her own history, and soon the recital of it would surprise no one so much as herself.

It was five o'clock. Madame d'Estrées had just established herself in the silk-panelled drawing-room

of Donna Laura's apartment, expectant of visitors, and, in particular, of her daughter.

In begging Kitty to come on this particular afternoon, she had not thought fit to mention that it would be Donna Laura's 'day.' Had she done so, Kitty, in consideration of her mourning, would perhaps have cried off. Whereas, really,—poor dear child!—what she wanted was distraction and amusement.

And what Madame d'Estrées wanted was the presence beside her, in public, of Lady Kitty Ashe. Kitty had already visited her mother privately, and had explored the antiquities of the Vercelli palace. But Madame d'Estrées was now intent on something more and different.

For in the four years which had now elapsed since the Ashes' marriage, this lively lady had known adversity. She had been forced to leave London, as we have seen, by the pressure of certain facts in her past history, so ancient and far removed when their true punishment began, that she no doubt felt it highly unjust that she should be punished for them at all. Her London debts had swallowed up what then remained to her of fortune; and, afterwards, the allowance from the Ashes was all she had to depend on. Banished to Paris, she fell into a lower stratum of life, at a moment when her faithful and mysterious friend Markham Warington was held in Scotland by the first painful symptoms of his sister's last illness, and could do but little for her. She had in fact known the sordid shifts and straits of poverty, though the smallest moral effort would have saved her from them. She had kept disreputable company, she had been miserable, and base; and although shame is not easy to persons of her temperament, it may perhaps be said that she was ashamed of this period of her existence. Appeals to the Ashes yielded less and less, and Warington seemed to have forsaken her. She awoke at last to a panic-

stricken fear of darker possibilities and more real suffering than any she had yet known, and under the stress of this fear she collapsed physically, writing both to Warington and to the Ashes in a tone of mingled reproach and despair.

The Ashes sent money, and though Kitty was at the moment not fit to travel, prepared to come. Warington, who had just closed the eyes of his sister, went at once. He was now the last of his family, without any ties that he could not lawfully break. Within two days of his arrival in Paris Madame d'Estrées had promised to marry him in three months, to break off all her Paris associations, and to give her life henceforward into his somewhat stern hands. The visit to Venice was part of the price that he had had to pay for her decision. Marguerite pleaded, with a shudder, that she must have a little amusement, before she went to live in Dumfriesshire; and he had been obliged to acquiesce in her arrangement with Donna Laura,—stipulating only that he should be their escort and guardian.

What had moved him to such an act? His reasons can only be guessed at. Warington was a man of religion,—a Calvinist by education and inheritance, and of a silent and dreamy temperament. He had been intimate with very few women in his life. His sister had been a second mother to him, and both of them had been the guardians of their younger brother. When this adored brother fell shot through the lungs in the hopeless defence of Lady Blackwater's reputation, it would have been natural enough that Markham should hate the woman who had been the occasion of such a calamity. The sister, a pious and devoted Christian, had indeed hated her, properly and duly, thenceforward. Markham on the contrary accepted his brother's last commission without reluctance. In this matter at least Lady Blackwater had

not been directly to blame; his mind acquitted her; and her soft distressed beauty touched his heart. Before he knew where he was she had made an impression upon him that was to be life-long.

Then gradually he awoke to a full knowledge of her character. He suffered, but otherwise it made no difference. Finding it was then impossible to persuade her to marry him, he watched over her as best he could, for some years, passing through phases of alternate hope and disgust. His sister's affection for him was clouded by his strange relation to the Jezebel who in her opinion had destroyed their brother. He could not help it; he could only do his best to meet both claims upon him. During her lingering passage to the grave his sister had nearly severed him from Marguerite d'Estrées. She died however just in time, and now here he was in Venice, passing through what seemed to him one of the ante-rooms of life, leading to no very radiant beyond. But, radiant or no, his path lay thither. And at the same time he saw that although Marguerite felt him to be her only refuge from poverty and disgrace, she was painfully afraid of him, and afraid of the life into which he was leading her.

The first guest of the afternoon proved to be Louis Harman, the painter and dilettante, who had been in former days one of the *habitués* of the house in St. James's Place. This perfectly correct yet tolerant gentleman was wintering in Venice in order to copy the Carpaccios in San Giorgio dei Schiavoni. His copies were not good, but they were all promised to artistic fair ladies, and the days which the painter spent upon them were happy and harmless.

He came in gaily, delighted to see Madame d'Estrées in flourishing circumstances again, delivered apparently

from the abyss into which he had found her sliding on the occasion of various chance visits of his own to Paris. Warington's doing apparently,—queer fellow!

'Well!—I saw Lady Kitty in the Piazza this afternoon,' he said, as he sat down beside his hostess.—Donna Laura had not yet appeared.—'Very thin and fragile! But by Jove how these English beauties hold their own!'

'Irish, if you please,' said Madame d'Estrées, smiling.

Harman bowed to her correction, admiring at the same time both the toilette and the good looks of his companion. Dropping his voice, he asked, with a gingerly and sympathetic air, whether all was now well with the Ashe *ménage*. He had been sorry to hear certain gossip of the year before—

Madame d'Estrées laughed. Yes, she understood that Kitty had behaved like a little goose with that *poseur* Cliffe. But that was all over,—long ago.

'Why, the silly child has everything she wants! William is devoted to her—and it can't be long before he succeeds.'

'No need to go trifling with poets!' said Harman, smiling. 'By the way, do you know that Geoffrey Cliffe is in Venice?'

Madame d'Estrées opened her eyes. 'Est-il possible? Oh! but Kitty has forgotten all about him.'

'Of course,' said Harman. 'I am told he has been seen with the Ricci.'

Madame d'Estrées raised her shoulders, this time, in addition to her eyes. Then her face clouded.

'I believe'—she said, slowly,—'that woman may come here this afternoon!'

'Is she a friend of yours?' Harman's tone expressed his surprise.

'I knew her in Paris,' said Madame d'Estrées, with some hesitation,—'when she was a student at the Con-

servatoire. She and I had some common acquaintance. And now—frankly, I daren't offend her. She has the most appalling temper!—and she sticks at nothing.'

Harman wondered what the exact truth of this might be, but did not inquire. And as guests—including Colonel Warington—began to arrive, and Donna Laura appeared and began to dispense tea, the *tête-à-tête* was interrupted.

Donna Laura's salon was soon well filled, and Harman watched the gathering with curiosity. As far as it concerned Madame d'Estrées,—and she was clearly the main attraction which had brought it together,—it represented, he saw, a phase of social recovery. A few prominent Englishmen, passing through Venice, came in without their wives, making perfunctory excuse for the absence of these ladies. But the cosmopolitans of all kinds, who crowded in—Anglo-Italians, foreign diplomats, travellers of many sorts, and a few restless Venetians, bearing the great names of old, to whom their own Venice was little more than a place of occasional sojourn,—made satisfactory amends for these persons of too long memories. In all these travellers' towns, Venice, Rome, and Florence, there is indeed a society, and a very agreeable society, which is wholly irresponsible, and asks few or no questions. The elements of it meet as strangers; and as strangers they mostly part. But between the meeting and the parting there lies a moment, all the gayer perhaps because of its social uncertainty and freedom.

Madame d'Estrées was profiting by it to the full. She was in excellent spirits and talk; bright rose carnations shone in the bosom of her dress; one white arm, bared to the elbow, lay stretched carelessly on the fine cut-velvet which covered the gilt sofa—part of a suite of Venetian Louis Quinze, clumsily gorgeous,—on which she sat; the other hand pulled the ears of a toy-spaniel. On the ceiling above her, Tiepolo had painted a headlong

group of sensuous forms, alive with vulgar movement and passion; the *putti* and the goddesses, peering through aerial balustrades, looked down complacently on Madame d'Estrées.

Meanwhile there stood behind her,—a silent, distinguished figure,—the man of whom Harman saw that she was always nervously and sometimes timidly conscious. Harman had been reading Molière's 'Don Juan.' The sentinel figure of Warington mingled in his imagination with the statue of the Commander.

Or, again, he was tickled by a vision of Madame d'Estrées grown old, living in a Scotch house, turreted and severe, tended by servants of the 'Auld Licht,' or shivering under a faithful minister on Sundays. Had she any idea of the sort of fold towards which Warington—at once Covenanter and man of the world—was carrying his lost sheep?

The sheep, however, was still gambolling at large. Occasionally a guest appeared who proved it. For instance, at a certain tumultuous entrance,—billowing skirts, vast hat, and high-pitched voice, all combining in the effect,—Madame d'Estrées flushed violently, and Warington's stiffness redoubled. On the threshold stood the young actress, Mademoiselle Ricci, a Marseillaise, half French, half Italian, who was at the moment the talk of Venice. Why, would take too long to tell. It was by no means mostly due to her talent, which however was displayed at the Apollo theatre two or three times a week, and was no doubt considerable. She was a flamboyant lady, with astonishing black eyes, a too transparent white dress, over which was slung a small black mantilla, a scarlet hat and parasol and a startling fan of the same colour. Both before and after her greeting of Madame d'Estrées,—whom she called her 'chérie' and her 'belle Marguerite'—she created a whirlwind in the salon.

She was noisy, rude, and false; it could only be said on the other side that she was handsome—for those who admired the kind of thing; and famous—more or less. The intimacy of the party was broken up by her, for wherever she was she brought uproar, and it was impossible to forget her. And this uneasy attention which she compelled was at its height when the door was once more thrown open for the entrance of Lady Kitty Ashe.

'Ah! my darling Kitty!' cried Madame d'Estrées, rising in a soft enthusiasm.

Kitty came in slowly, holding herself very erect, a delicate and distinguished figure, in her deep mourning. She frowned as she saw the crowd in the room.

'I'll come another time!' she said hastily to her mother, beginning to retreat.

'Oh! Kitty!' cried Madame d'Estrées in distress, holding her fast.

At that moment Harman, who was watching them both with keenness, saw that Kitty had perceived Mademoiselle Ricci. The actress had paused in her chatter to stare at the new comer. She sat fronting the entrance, her head insolently thrown back, knees crossed, a cigarette poised in the plump and dimpled hand.—

A start ran through Kitty's small person. She allowed her mother to lead her in, and introduce her to Donna Laura.

'Ah-ha! my lady,' said Harman to himself. 'Are you perhaps interested in the Ricci? Is it possible even that you have seen her before?'

Kitty, however, betrayed herself to no one else. To other people it was only evident that she did not mean to be introduced to the actress. She pointedly and sharply avoided it. This was interpreted as aristocratic *hauteur*, and did her no harm. On the contrary; she was soon chattering French with a group of diplomats, and the

'A MARSEILLAISE, HALF FRENCH, HALF ITALIAN'

centre of the most animated group in the room. All the new comers who could, attached themselves to it, and the actress found herself presently almost deserted. She put up her eyeglass, studied Kitty impertinently, and asked a man sitting near her for the name of the strange lady.

'Isn't she lovely, my little Kitty!' said Madame d'Estrées, in the ears of a Bavarian baron, who was also much occupied in staring at the small beauty in black. 'I may say it, though I am her mother. And my son-in-law too. Have you seen him? Such a handsome fellow! —and *such* a dear!—so kind to me. They *say*, you know, that he will be Prime Minister.'

The baron bowed—ironically—and inquired who the gentleman might be. He had not caught Kitty's name, and Madame d'Estrées had been for some time labelled in his mind as something very near to an adventuress.

Madame d'Estrées eagerly explained, and he bowed again,—with a difference. He was a man of great intelligence, acquainted with English politics. So that was *really* the wife of the man to whose personality and future the London correspondent of the 'Allgemeine Zeitung' had within the preceding week devoted a particularly interesting article, which he had read with attention. His estimate of Madame d'Estrées' place in the world altered at once. Yet it was strange that she—or rather Donna Laura—should admit such a person as Mademoiselle Ricci to their salon.

The mother indeed that afternoon had much reason to be socially grateful to the daughter. Curious contrast with the days when Kitty had been the mere troublesome appendage of her mother's life! It was clear to Marguerite d'Estrées now that if she was to accept restraint and virtuous living, if she was to submit to this marriage she dreaded, yet saw no way to escape,—her best link with the gay world in the future might well be

through the Ashes. Kitty could do a great deal for her; let her cultivate Kitty; and begin,—perhaps,—by convincing William Ashe on this present occasion that for once she was not going to ask him for money.

In the height of the party Lord Magellan appeared. Madame d'Estrées at first looked at him with bewilderment, till Kitty, shaking herself free, came hastily forward to introduce him. At the name the mother's face flashed into smiles. The ramifications of two or three aristocracies represented the only subject she might be said to know. Dear Kitty!

Lord Magellan, after Madame d'Estrées had talked to him about his family in a few light and skilful phrases, which suggested knowledge, while avoiding flattery, was introduced to the Bavarian baron, and a French naval officer. But he was not interesting to them, nor they to him; Kitty was surrounded and unapproachable; and a flood of new arrivals distracted Madame d'Estrées' attention. The Ricci, who had noticed the restrained *empressement* of his reception, pounced on the young man, taming her ways and gestures to what she supposed to be his English prudery, and produced an immediate effect upon him. Lord Magellan, who was only dumb with English marriageable girls, allowed himself to be amused, and threw himself into a low chair by the actress,—a capture apparently for the afternoon.

Louis Harman was sitting behind Kitty a little to her right. He saw her watching the actress and her companion; noticed a compression of the lip, a flash in the eye. She sprang up, said she must go home, and practically dissolved the party.

Mademoiselle Ricci, who had also risen, proposed to Lord Magellan that she should take him in her gondola to the shop of a famous dealer on the Canal.

'Thank you very much,'—said Lord Magellan irre-

solute, and he looked at Kitty. The look apparently decided him, for he immediately added that he had unfortunately an engagement in the opposite direction. The actress angrily drew herself up, and proposed a later appointment. Then Kitty carelessly intervened.

'Do you remember that you promised to see me home?' she said to the young man. 'Don't if it bores you!'

Lord Magellan eagerly protested. Kitty moved away, and he followed her.

'Chère Madame, will you present me to your daughter?' said the Ricci in an unnecessarily loud voice.

Madame d'Estrées, with a flurried gesture, touched Kitty on the arm.

'Kitty, Mademoiselle Ricci'—

Kitty took no notice. Madame d'Estrées said quickly, in a low imploring voice—

'Please, dear Kitty. I'll explain'—

Kitty turned abruptly, looked at her mother, and at the woman to whom she was to be introduced.

'Ah! comme elle est charmante!' cried the actress, with an inflection of irony in her strident voice—'Miladi, il faut absolument que nous nous connaissions. Je connais votre chère mère depuis si longtemps! A Paris, l'hiver passé, c'etait une amitié des plus tendres!'

The nasal drag she gave to the words was partly natural, partly insolent. Madame d'Estrées bit her lip.

'Oui?' said Kitty indifferently.—'Je n'en avais jamais entendu parler.'

Her brilliant eyes studied the woman before her. 'She has some hold on Maman,' she said to herself, in disgust.—'She knows of something shady that Maman has done.' Then another thought stung her; and with the most indifferent bow, triumphing in the evident offence that she was giving, she turned to Lord Magellan.

'You'd like to see the Palazzo?'

Warington at once offered himself as a guide.

But Kitty declared she knew the way, would just show Lord Magellan the *piano nobile*, dismiss him at the grand staircase, and return. Lord Magellan made his farewells.

As Kitty passed through the door of the salon, while the young man held back the velvet *portière* which hung over it, she was aware that Mademoiselle Ricci was watching her. The Marseillaise was leaning heavily on a *fauteuil*, supported by a hand behind her. A slow, disdainful smile played about her lips, some evil threatening thought expressed itself through every feature of her rounded coarsened beauty. Kitty's sharp look met hers; and the curtain dropped.

'Don't please let that woman take you anywhere—to see anything!' said Kitty with energy to her companion, as they walked through the rooms of the *mezzanino*.

Lord Magellan laughed. 'What's the matter with her?'

'Oh nothing!—said Kitty impatiently, 'except that she's wicked—and common—and a snake—and your mother would have a fit if she knew you had anything to do with her.'

The red-haired youth looked grave.

'Thank you, Lady Kitty,' he said quietly. 'I'll take your advice.'

'Oh! I say, what a nice boy you are!' cried Kitty impulsively, laying a hand a moment on his shoulder. And then, as though his filial instinct had awakened hers, she added with hasty falsehood, 'Maman of course knows nothing about her. That was just bluff what she said. But Donna Laura oughtn't to ask such people. There—that's the way.'

And she pointed to a small staircase in the wall,

whereof the trap-door at the top was open. They climbed it, and found themselves at once in one of the great rooms of the *piano nobile*, to which this quick and easy access from the inhabited *entresol* had been but recently contrived.

'What a marvellous place!' cried Lord Magellan, looking round him.

They were in the principal apartment of the famous Vercelli palace,—a legacy from one of those classical architects whose work may be seen in the late seventeenth century buildings of Venice. The rooms, enormously high, panelled here and there in tattered velvets and brocades, or frescoed in fast-fading scenes of old Venetian life, stretched in bewildering succession on either side of a central passage or broad corridor, all of them leading at last on the northern side to a vast hall painted in architectural perspective by the pupils of Tiepolo, and overarched by a ceiling in which the master himself had massed a multitude of forms equal to Rubens in variety and facility of design, expressed in a thin trenchancy of style. Figures recalling the ancient triumphs and possessions of Venice, in days when she sat dishonoured and despoiled, crowded the coved roof, the painted cornices and pediments. Gaily coloured birds hovered in blue skies; philosophers and poets in grisaille made a strange background for large-limbed beauties couched on roses, or young warriors amid trophies of shining arms; and while all this garrulous commonplace lived and breathed above, the walls below, cold in colour, and academic in treatment, maintained as best they could the dignity of the vast place, thus given up to one of the greatest of artists and emptiest of minds.

On the floor of this magnificent hall stood a few old and broken chairs. But the candelabra of glass and ormolu, hanging from the ceiling, were very nearly of the

date of the palace, and superb. Meanwhile, through a faded taffetas of a golden-brown shade, the afternoon light from the high windows to the south-west poured into the stately room.

'How it dwarfs us!' said Lord Magellan, looking at his companion. 'One feels the merest pigmy! From the age of decadence indeed!'—he glanced at the guide-book in his hand. 'Good Heavens!—if this was their decay—what was their bloom?'

'Yes,—it's big—and jolly. I like it,' said Kitty absently. Then she recollected herself. 'This is your way out. Federigo!' she called to an old man, the *custode* of the palace, who appeared at the magnificent door leading to the grand staircase.

'Commanda, eccellenza!' The old man, bent and feeble, approached. He carried a watering-pot wherewith he was about to minister to some straggling flowers in the windows fronting the Grand Canal. A thin cat rubbed itself against his legs. As he stood in his shabbiness under the high carved door, the only permanent denizen of the building, he seemed an embodiment of the old shrunken Venetian life, still haunting a city it was no longer strong enough to use.

'Will you show this Signore the way out?' said Kitty, in tourists' Italian. 'Are you soon shutting up?'

For the main palazzo, which during the day was often shown to sightseers, was locked at half-past five, only the two *entresols*—one tenanted by Donna Laura, the other by the *custode*,—remaining accessible.

The old man murmured something which Kitty did not understand, pointing at the same time to a door leading to the interior of the *piano nobile*. Kitty thought that he asked her to be quick, if she wished still to go round the palace. She tried to explain that he might lock up if he pleased; her way of retreat to the *mezzanino*,

down the small staircase, was always open. Federigo looked puzzled, again said something in unintelligible Venetian, and led the way to the grand staircase followed by Lord Magellan.

A heavy door clanged below. Kitty was alone. She looked round her—at the stretches of marble floor, and the streaks of pale sunshine that lay upon its black and white, at the lofty walls painted with a dim superb architecture, at the crowded ceiling, the gorgeous candelabra. With its costly decoration, the great room suggested a rich and festal life; thronging groups below answering to the Tiepolo groups above; beauties patched and masked; gallants in brocaded coats; splendid senators, robed like William at the Fancy Ball.

Suddenly she caught sight of herself in one of the high and narrow mirrors that filled the spaces between the windows. In her mourning dress, with the light behind her, she made a tiny spectre in the immense hall. The image of her present self—frail, black-robed—recalled the two figures in the glass of her Hill Street room,—the sparkling white of her goddess dress, and William's smiling face above hers, his arm round her waist.

How happy she had been that night! Even her wild fury with Mary Lyster seemed to her now a kind of happiness. How gladly would she have exchanged for it either of the two terrors that now possessed her!

With a shiver, she crossed the hall, and pushed her way into the suite of rooms on the northern side. She felt herself in absolute possession of the palace. Federigo no doubt had locked up; her mother and a few guests were still talking in the salon of the *mezzanino* expecting her to return. She would return,—soon; but the solitariness and wildness of this deserted place drew her on.

Room after room opened before her,—bare, save for

a few worm-eaten chairs, a fragment of tapestry on the wall, or some tattered portraits in the Longhi manner, indifferent to begin with, and long since ruined by neglect. Yet here and there a young face looked out, roses in the hair and at the breast; or a Doge's cap,—and beneath it phantom features still breathing even in the last decay of canvas and paint the violence and intrigue of the living man,—the ghost of character held there by the ghost of art. Or a lad in slashed brocade, for whom even in this silent palace, and in spite of the gaping crack across his face, life was still young; a Cardinal; a nun; a man of letters in clerical dress, the Abbé Prévost of his day . . .

Presently she found herself in a wide corridor, before a high closed door. She tried it, and saw a staircase mounting and descending. A passion of curiosity that was half romance, half restlessness, drove her on. She began to ascend the marble steps, hearing only the echo of her own movements, a little afraid of the cold spaces of the vast house, and yet delighting in the fancies that crowded upon her. At the top of the flight she found, of course, another apartment, on the same plan as the one below, but smaller and less stately. The central hall entered from a door supported by marble caryatids, was flagged in yellow marble, and frescoed freely with faded eighteenth century scenes,—Cardinals walking in stiff gardens—a Pope alighting from his coach, surrounded by peasants on their knees, and behind him, fountains, and obelisk, and the towering façade of St. Peter's. At the moment, thanks to a last glow of light coming in through a west window at the further end, it was a place beautiful though forlorn. But the rooms into which she looked on either side were wreck and desolation itself, crowded with broken furniture, many of them shuttered and dark.

As she closed the last door, her attention was caught by a strange bust placed on a pedestal above the entrance.

What was wrong with it? An accident?—an injury? She went nearer, straining her eyes to see. No!—there was no injury. The face indeed was gone. Or rather, where the face should have been, there now descended a marble veil from brow to breast, of the most singular and sinister effect. Otherwise the bust was that of a young and beautiful woman. A pleasing horror seized on Kitty as she looked. Her fancy hunted for the clue. A faithless wife, blotted from her place?—made infamous for ever by the veil which hid from human eye the beauty she had dishonoured? Or a beloved mistress, on whom the mourning lover could no longer bear to look,—the veil an emblem of undying and irremediable grief?

Kitty stood enthralled, striving to pierce the ghastly meaning of the bust, when a sound,—a distant sound—sent a shock through her. She heard a step overhead, in the topmost apartment, or *mansarde* of the palace, a step that presently traversed the whole length of the floor immediately above her head, and began to descend the stair.

Strange! Federigo must have shut the great gates by this time,—as she had bade him? He himself inhabited the smaller *entresol* on the further side of the palace, far away. Other inhabitants there were none; so Donna Laura had assured her.

The step approached, resonant in the silence. Kitty, seized with nervous fright, turned and ran down the broad staircase by which she had come, through the series of deserted rooms in the *piano nobile*, till she reached the great hall.

There she paused panting, curiosity and daring once more getting the upper hand. The door she had just passed through, which gave access to the staircase, opened again and shut. The stranger who had entered came

leisurely towards the hall, lingering apparently now and then to look at objects on the way. Presently a voice,—an exclamation.

Kitty retreated, caught at the arm of a chair for support, clung to it trembling. A man entered; holding his hat in one hand, and a small white glove in the other.

At sight of the lady in black, standing on the other side of the hall, he started violently,—and stopped. Then just as Kitty, who had so far made neither sound nor movement, took the first hurried step towards the staircase by which she had entered, Geoffrey Cliffe came forward.

'How do you do, Lady Kitty? Do not, I beg of you, let me disturb you. I had half an hour to spare and I gave the old man downstairs a franc or two, that he might let me wander over this magnificent old place by myself for a bit. I have always had a fancy for deserted houses. You, I gather, have it too. I will not interfere with you for a moment. Before I go, however, let me return what I believe to be your property.'

He came nearer, with a studied deliberate air, and held out the white glove. She saw it was her own, and accepted it.

'Thank you.

She bowed with all the haughtiness she could muster, though her limbs shook under her. Then as she walked quickly towards the door of exit, Cliffe, who was nearer to it than she, also moved towards it, and threw it open for her. As she approached him, he said quietly,—

'This is not the first time we have met in Venice, Lady Kitty.'

She wavered, could not avoid looking at him, and stood arrested. That almost white head!—that furrowed brow!—those haggard eyes! A slight involuntary cry broke from her lips.

Cliffe smiled. Then he straightened his tall figure.

'You see perhaps that I have not grown younger. You are quite right. I have left my youth—what remained of it—among those splendid fellows, whom the Turks have been harrying and torturing. Well!—they were worth it. I would give it them again.'

There was a short silence.

The eyes of each perused the other's face. Kitty began some words, and left them unfinished. Cliffe resumed—in another tone, while the door he held swung gently backwards, his hand following it.

'I spent last winter, as perhaps you know, with the Bosnian insurgents in the mountains. It was a tough business,—hardships I should never have had the pluck to face, if I had known what was before me. Then in July I got fever. I had to come away, to find a doctor, and I was a long time at Cattaro pulling round. And meanwhile, the Turks,—God blast them!—have been at their fiends' work. Half my particular friends, with whom I spent the winter, have been hacked to pieces since I left them.'

She wavered, held by his look, by the coercion of that mingled passion and indifference with which he spoke. There was in his manner no suggestion whatever of things behind, no reference to herself, or to the past between them. His passion, it seemed, was for his comrades; his indifference for her. What had he to do with her any more? He had been among the realities of battle and death, while she had been mincing and ambling along the usual feminine path. That was the utterance, it seemed, of the man's whole manner and personality, and nothing could have more effectually recalled Kitty's wild nature to the lure.

'Are you going back?' She had turned from him and was pulling at the fingers of the glove he had picked up.

'Of course! I am only kicking my heels here, till I can collect the money and stores,—aye, and the *men*—I want. I give my orders in London, and I must be here to see to the transhipment of stores, and the embarkation of my small force! Not meant for the newspapers, you see, Lady Kitty,—these little details!'

He drew himself up smiling, his worn aspect expressing just that mingling of dare-devil adventure with subtler and more self-conscious things which gave edge and power to his personality.

'I heard you were wounded,' said Kitty, abruptly.

'So I was—badly. We were defending a *polje*—one of their high mountain valleys, against a Beg and his troops. My left arm'—he pointed to the black sling in which it was still held,—'was nearly cut to pieces. However, it is practically well.'

He took it out of the sling and showed that he could use it. Then his expression changed. He stepped back to the door, and opened it ceremoniously.

'Don't, however, let me delay you, Lady Kitty—by my chatter.'

Kitty's cheeks were crimson. Her momentary yielding vanished in a passion of scorn. What!—he knew that she had seen him before, seen him with that woman,—and he dared to play the mere shattered hero, kept in Venice by these crusader's reasons!

'Have you another volume on the way?'—she asked him, as she advanced. 'I read your last.'

Her smile was the smile of an enemy. He eyed her strangely.

'Did you? That was waste of time.'

'I think you intended I should read it.'

He hesitated.

'Lady Kitty!—those things are very far away. I can't defend myself—for they seem wiped out.' He had

crossed his arms, and was leaning back against the open door, a fine rugged figure, by no means repentant.

Kitty laughed.

'You overstate the difference!'

'Between the past and the present? What does that mean?'

She dropped her eyes a moment, then raised them.

'Do you often go to San Lazzaro?'

He bowed.

'I had a suspicion that the vision at the window—though it was there only an instant—was you! So you saw Mademoiselle Ricci?'

His tone was assurance itself. Kitty disdained to answer. Her slight gesture bade him let her pass through. But he ignored it.

'I find her kind, Lady Kitty. She listens to me,—I get sympathy from her.'

'And you want sympathy?'

Her tone stung him. 'As a hungry man wants food—as an artist wants beauty. But I know where I shall *not* get it.'

'That is always a gain!' said Kitty, throwing back her little head. 'Mr. Cliffe, pray let me bid you good-bye.'

He suddenly made a step forward. 'Lady Kitty!'—his deep-set, imperious eyes searched her face—'I can't restrain myself. Your look—your expression—go to my heart. Laugh at me if you like. It's true. What have you been doing with yourself?'

He bent towards her, scrutinising every delicate feature, and as it seemed, shaken with agitation. She breathed fast.

'Mr. Cliffe, you must know that any sympathy from you to me—is an insult! Kindly let me pass.'

He too flushed deeply.

'Insult is a hard word, Lady Kitty. I regret that poem.'

She swept forward in silence, but he still stood in the way.

'I wrote it—almost in delirium. Ah, well,'—he shook his head impatiently—'If you don't believe me, let it be. I am not the man I was. The perspective of things is altered for me.' His voice fell. 'Women and children in their blood,—heroic trust,—and brute hate,—the stars for candles,—the high peaks for friends,—those things have come between me and the past. But you are right; we had better not talk any more. I hear old Federigo coming up the stairs. Good night, Lady Kitty—good night!'

He opened the door. She passed him, and to her own intense annoyance, a bunch of pale roses she carried at her belt brushed against the doorway, so that one broke and fell. She turned to pick it up, but it was already in Cliffe's hand. She held out hers, threateningly.

'I think not.' He put it in his pocket. 'Here is Federigo. Good-night.'

It was quite dark when Kitty reached home. She groped her way upstairs, and opened the door of the salon. So weary was she that she dropped into the first chair, not seeing at first that anyone was in the room. Then she caught sight of a brown-paper parcel, apparently just unfastened, on the table, and within it three books, of similar shape and size. A movement startled her.

'William!'

Ashe rose slowly from the deep chair in which he had been sitting. His aspect seemed to her terrified eyes utterly and wholly changed. In his hand he held a book like those on the table, and a paper-cutter. His face

expressed the remote abstraction of a man who has been wrestling his way through some hard contest of the mind.

She ran to him. She wound her arms round him.

'William, William! I didn't mean any harm!—I didn't! Oh! I have been so miserable! I tried to stop it—I did all I could. I have hardly slept at all—since we talked—you remember? Oh, William, look at me!—Don't be angry with me!—'

Ashe disengaged himself.

'I have asked Blanche to pack for me to-night, Kitty. I go home by the early train to-morrow.'

'Home!'

She stood petrified; then a light flashed into her face.

You'll buy it all up? You'll stop it, William?'

Ashe drew himself together.

'I am going home,' he said, with slow decision,—'to place my resignation in the hands of Lord Parham.'

CHAPTER XXI

KITTY fell back in silence, staring at William. She loosened her mantle and threw it off, then she sat down in a chair near the wood fire, and bent over it shivering.

'Of course you didn't mean that, William?' she said, at last.

Ashe turned.

'I should not have said it, unless I had meant every word of it. It is of course the only thing to be done.'

Kitty looked at him miserably. 'But you *can't* mean that—that you'll resign because of that book?'

She pulled it towards her and turned over the pages with a hand that trembled. 'That would be too foolish!'

Ashe made no reply. He was standing before the fire, with his hands in his pockets, and a face half absent half ironical, as though his mind followed the sequences of a far distant future.

'William!'—she caught the sleeve of his coat with a little cry,—'I wrote that book because I thought it would help you.'

His attention came back to her.

'Yes, Kitty, I believe you did.'

She gulped down a sob. His tone was so odd, so remote.

'Many people have done such things. I know they have. Why—why it was only meant—as a skit—to make people laugh! There's *no* harm in it, William.'

Ashe without speaking took up the book, and looked back at certain pages, which he seemed to have marked. Kitty's feeling as she watched him was the feeling of the condemned culprit, held dumb and strangled in the grip of his own sense of justice, and yet passionately conscious how much more he could say for himself than anybody is ever likely to say for him.

'When did you have the first idea of this book, Kitty?'

'About a year ago,' she said in a low voice.

'In October?—At Haggart?'

Kitty nodded.

Ashe thought. Her admission took him back to the autumn weeks at Haggart, after the Cliffe crisis, and the rearrangement of the Ministry in the July of that year. He well remembered that those weeks had been weeks of special happiness for both of them. Afterwards, the winter had brought many renewed qualms and vexations. But, in that period, between the storms of the session and Kitty's escapades in the hunting field, memory recalled a tender melting time,—a time rich in hidden and exquisite hours, when with Kitty on his breast, lip to lip, and heart to heart, he had reaped, as it seemed to him, the fruits of that indulgence, which, as he knew, his mother scorned. And, at that very moment, behind his back, out of his sight, she had begun this atrocious thing.

He looked at her again,—the bitterness almost at his lips, almost beyond his control.

'I wish I knew what could have been your possible object in writing it?'

She sat up and confronted him. The colour flamed back again into her pale cheeks.

'You know I told you—when we had that talk in London—that I wanted to write. I thought it would be good for me—would take my thoughts off—well, what

had happened. And I began to write this—and it amused me to find I could do it—and I suppose I got carried away. I loved describing you, and glorifying you—and I loved making caricatures of Lady Parham—and all the people I hated. I used to work at it whenever you were away—or I was dull and there was nothing to do.

'Did it never occur to you,' said Ashe interrupting—'that it might get you—get us both, into trouble, and that you ought to tell me?'

She wavered.

'No!'—she said at last. 'I never did mean to tell you, while I was writing it. You know I don't tell lies, William! The real fact is I was afraid you'd stop it.'

'Good God!' He threw up his hands with a sound of amazement, then thrust them again into his pockets and began to pace up and down.

'But then'—she resumed—'I thought you'd soon get over it, and that it was funny,—and everybody would laugh—and you'd laugh—and there would be an end of it.'

He turned and stared at her. 'Frankly, Kitty!—I don't understand what you can be made of! You imagined that that sketch of Lord Parham'—he struck the open page—'a sketch written by *my wife*, describing my official chief—when he was my guest—under my own roof—with all sorts of details of the most intimate and offensive kind—mocking his speech—his manners—his little personal ways—charging him with being the corrupt tool of Lady Parham, disloyal to his colleagues, a man not to be trusted,—and justifying all this by a sort of evidence, that you could only have got as my wife and Lord Parham's hostess:—you actually supposed that you could write and publish *that*!—without in the first place its being plain to every Tom, Dick, and Harry that you had written

it,—and in the next, without making it impossible for your husband to remain a colleague of the man you had treated in such a way? Kitty!—you are not a stupid woman! Do you really mean to say that you could write and publish this book without *knowing* that you were doing a wrong action?—which, so far from serving me, could only damage my career irreparably? Did nothing—did no one, warn you?—if you were determined to keep such a secret from your husband whom it most concerned?'

He had come to stand beside her, both hands on the back of a chair,—stooping forward to emphasise his words,—the lines of his fine face and noble brow contracted by anger and pain.

'Mr. Darrell warned me,'—said Kitty in a low voice, as though those imperious eyes compelled the truth from her,—'but of course I didn't believe him.'

'Darrell!' cried Ashe in amazement,—'Darrell! You confided in him?'

'I told him all about it. It was he who took it to a publisher.'

'Hound!' said Ashe, between his teeth. 'So that was his revenge.'

'Oh, you needn't blame him too much,' said Kitty proudly, not understanding the remark. 'He wrote to me not long ago to say it was horribly unwise,—and that he washed his hands of it.'

'Aye—when he'd done the deed!—When did you show it him?' said Ashe impetuously.

'At Haggart—in August.'

'*Et tu Brute!*'—said Ashe turning away. 'Well, that's done with. Now the only thing to do is to face the music. I go home. Whatever can be done to withdraw the book from circulation, I shall of course do; but I gather from this precious letter'—he held up the note which had been enclosed in the parcel,—'that some

thousands of copies have already been ordered by the booksellers, and a few distributed to 'persons in high places.'

'William,' she said, in despair, catching his arm again,—'listen. I offered the man two hundred pounds only yesterday to stop it.'

Ashe laughed.

'What did he reply?'

'He said it was impossible. Fifty copies had been already issued.'

'The review copies no doubt. By next week there will be I should say five thousand in the shops. Your man understands his business, Kitty. This is the kind of puff preliminary he has been scattering about.'

And with sparkling eyes he handed to her a printed slip containing an outline of the book for the information of the booksellers.

It drew attention to the extraordinary interest of the production, as a painting of the upper class by the hand of one belonging to its inmost circle. 'People of the highest social and political importance will be recognised at once; the writer handles Cabinet Ministers and their wives with equal freedom, and with a touch betraying the closest and most intimate knowledge. Details hitherto quite unknown to the public of ministerial combinations and intrigues,—especially of the feminine influences involved—will be found here in their lightest and most amusing form. A certain famous Fancy Ball will be identified without difficulty. Scathing as some of the portraits are, the writer is by no means merely cynical. The central figure of the book is a young and rising statesman, whose aim and hopes are touched with a loving hand,—the charm of the portrait being only equalled by the venom with which the writer assails those who have thwarted or injured his hero. But our advice is simply—"Buy and Read!" Conjecture will run

wild about the writer. All we can say is that the most romantic or interesting surmise that can possibly be formed will fall far short of the reality.'—

'The beast is a shrewd beast!' said Ashe as he raised himself from the stooping position in which he had been following the sentences over Kitty's shoulder. 'He knows that the public will rush for his wares! How much money did he offer you, Kitty?'

He turned sharply on his heel, to wait for her reply.

'A hundred pounds,'—said Kitty almost inaudibly,—'and a hundred more if five thousand sold.' She had returned again to her crouching attitude over the fire.

'Generous!—upon my word!'—said Ashe, scornfully turning over the two thick-leaved loosely-printed Mudie volumes. 'A guinea to the public, I suppose,—fifteen shillings to the trade. Darrell didn't exactly advise you to advantage, Kitty.'

Kitty kept silence. The sarcastic violence of his tone fell on her like a blow. She seemed to shrink together; while Ashe resumed his walk to and fro.

Presently, however, she looked up, to ask in a voice that tried for steadiness—

'What do you mean to do—exactly—William?'

'I shall of course buy up all I can; I shall employ some lawyer fellow, and appeal to the good feelings of the newspapers. There will be no trouble with the respectable ones. But some copies will get out, and some of the Opposition newspapers will make capital out of them. Naturally!—they'd be precious fools if they didn't.'

A momentary hope sprang up in Kitty.

'But if you buy it up—and stop all the papers that matter,'—she faltered,—'why should you resign, William? There won't be—such great harm done.'

For answer, he opened the book, and without speaking pointed to two passages,—the first, an account full of point and malice of the negotiations between himself and Lord Parham at the time when he entered the Cabinet, the conditions he himself had made, and the confidential comments of the Premier on the men and affairs of the moment.—

'Do you remember the night when I told you those things, Kitty?'

Yes, Kitty remembered well. It was a night of intimate talk between man and wife, a night when she had shown him her sweetest tenderest mood, and he—incorrigible optimist!—had persuaded himself that she was growing as wise as she was lovely.

Her lip trembled. Then he pointed to the second,—to the pitiless picture of Lord Parham at Haggart.

'You wrote that—when he was under our roof—there, by our pressing invitation! You couldn't have written it—unless he had so put himself in your power. A wandering Arab, Kitty, will do no harm to the man who has eaten and drunk in his tent!'

She looked up, and as she read his face, she understood at last how what she had done had outraged in him all the natural and all the inherited instincts of a generous and fastidious nature. The 'great gentleman,' so strong in him as in all the best of English statesmen, whether they spring from the classes or the masses, was up in arms.

She sprang to her feet with a cry. 'William, you can't give up politics! It would make you miserable.'

'That can't be helped. And I couldn't go on like this, Kitty,—even if this affair of the book could be patched up. The strain's too great.'

They were but a yard apart, and yet she seemed to be looking at him across a gulf.

'You have been so happy in your work!' This time, the sob escaped her.

'Oh don't let's talk about that,' he said abruptly, as he walked away. 'There'll be a certain relief in giving up the impossible. I'll go back to my books. We can travel I suppose, and put politics out of our heads.'

'But—you won't resign your seat?'

'No,'—he said, after a pause, 'No. As far as I can see at present, I sha'n't resign my seat, though my constituents of course will be very sick. But I doubt whether I shall stand again.'

Every phrase fell as though with a thud on Kitty's ear. It was the wreck of a man's life, and she had done it.

'Shall you—shall you go and see Lord Parham?' she asked, after a pause.

'I shall write to him first. I imagine'— he pointed to the letter lying on the table—'that creature has already sent him the book. Then later I dare say I shall see him.'

She looked up.

'If I wrote and told him it was all my doing, William?—if I grovelled to him?'

'The responsibility is mine,' he said sternly. 'I had no business to tell even you the things printed there. I told them at my own risk. If anything I say has any weight with you, Kitty, you will write nothing.'

She spread out her hands to the fire again, and he heard her say, as though to herself.

'The thing is—the awful thing is, that I'm mad—I must be mad. I never thought of all this when I was writing it. I wrote it in a kind of dream. In the first place I wanted to glorify you—'

He broke into an exclamation.

'Your *taste*, Kitty!—where was your taste? That a

wife should praise a husband in public! You could only make us both laughing-stocks.'

His handsome features quivered a little. He felt this part of it the most galling, the most humiliating of all; and she understood. In his eyes she had shown herself not only reckless and treacherous, but indelicate, vulgar, capable of besmirching the most sacred and intimate of relations.

She rose from her seat.

'I must go and take my things off,' she said, in 'a vague voice,' and as she moved she tottered a little. He turned to look at her. Amid his own crushing sense of defeat and catastrophe, his natural and righteous indignation, he remembered that she had been ill,—he remembered their child. But whether from the excitement, first of the meeting in the Vercelli palace, and now of this scene,—or merely from the heat of the fire over which she had been hanging, her cheeks were flushed, her eyes blazed. Her beauty had never been more evident; but it made little appeal to him; it was the wild ungovernable beauty from which he had suffered. He saw that she was excited, but there was an air also of returning physical vigour; and the nascent feeling which might have been strengthened by pallor and prostration died away.

Kitty moved as though to pass him and go to her room which opened out of the salon. But as she neared him she suddenly caught him by the arm.

'William!—William! don't do it!—don't resign! Let me apologise!'

He was angered by her persistence, and merely said coldly—

'I have given you my reasons, Kitty, why such a course is impossible.'

'And—and you start to-morrow morning?'

'By the early train. Please let me go, Kitty. There

are many things to arrange. I must order the gondola, and see if the people here can cash me a cheque.'

'You mean—to leave me alone?' The words had a curious emphasis.

'I had a few words with Miss French before you came in. The packet arrived by the evening post, and seeing that it was books—for you—I opened it. After about an hour,'—he turned and walked away again,—'I saw my bearings. Then I called Miss French, told her I should have to go to-morrow, and asked her how long she could stay with you.'

'William!' cried Kitty again, leaning heavily on the table beside her,—'don't go!—don't leave me!'

His face darkened.

'So you would prevent me from taking the only honourable, the only decent way out of this thing that remains to me?'

She made no immediate reply. She stood,—wrapped apparently in painful abstraction,—a creature lovely and distraught. The masses of her fair hair loosened by the breeze on the Canal had fallen about her cheeks and shoulders; her black hat framed the white brow and large feverish eyes; and the sable cape she had worn in the gondola had slipped down over the thin sloping shoulders revealing the young figure and the slender waist. She might have been a child of seventeen, grieving over the death of her goldfinch.

Ashe gathered together his official letters and papers, found his cheque-book and began to write. While he wrote he explained that Miss French could keep her company at least another fortnight, that he could leave with them four or five circular notes for immediate expenses, and would send more from home directly he arrived.

In the middle of his directions Kitty once more

appealed to him in a passionate muffled voice not to go. This time he lost his temper, and without answering her he hastily left the room to arrange his packing with his valet.

When he returned to the salon Kitty was not there. He and Miss French—who knew only that something tragic had happened in which Kitty was concerned—kept up a fragmentary conversation till dinner was announced and Kitty entered. She had evidently been weeping, but with powder and rouge she had tried to conceal the traces of her tears; and at dinner she sat silent hardly answering when Margaret French spoke to her.

After dinner Ashe went out with his cigar towards the Piazza. He was in a smarting dazed state, beginning however to realise the blow more than he had done at first. He believed that Parham himself would not be at all sorry to be rid of him. He and his friends formed a powerful group both in the Cabinet and out of it. But they were forcing the pace, and the elements of resistance and reaction were strong. He pictured the dismay of his friends, the possible breakdown of the reforming party. Of course they might so stand by him,—and the suppression of the book might be so complete,—

At this moment he caught sight of a newspaper contents bill, displayed at the door of the only shop in the Piazza which sold English newspapers. One of the lines ran 'Anonymous attack on the Premier.' He started, went in and bought the paper. There, in the 'London Topics' column was the following paragraph:

'A string of extracts from a forthcoming book, accompanied by a somewhat startling publisher's statement, has lately been sent round to the Press. We are asked not to print them before the day of publication, but they have already roused much attention, if not excite-

ment. They certainly contain a very gross attack on the Prime Minister, based apparently on first-hand information, and involving indiscretions personal and political of an unusually serious character. The wife of a Cabinet Minister is freely named as the writer, and even if no violation of Cabinet secrecy is concerned, it is clear that the book outrages the confidential relations which ought to subsist between a Premier and his colleagues, if Government on our English system is to be satisfactorily carried on. The statements it makes with every appearance of authority both as to the relations between Lord Parham and some of the most important members of his Cabinet, and as to the Premier's intentions with regard to one or two of the most vital questions now before the country, are calculated seriously to embarrass the Government. We fear the book will have a veritable *succès de scandale*.'

'That fellow at least has done his best to kick the ball, damn him!' thought Ashe, with contempt, as he thrust the paper into his pocket.

It was no more than he expected; but it put an end to all thoughts of a more hopeful kind. He walked up and down the Piazza smoking, till midnight, counting the hours till he could reach London, and revolving the phrases of a telegram to be sent to his solicitor before starting.

Kitty made no sign or sound when he entered her room. Her fair head was turned away from him, and all was dark. He could hardly believe that she was asleep; but it was a relief to him to accept her pretence of it, and to escape all further conversation. He himself slept but little. The mere profundity of the Venetian silence teased him; it reminded him how far he was from home.

Two images pursued him,—of Kitty writing the book, while he was away electioneering, or toiling at his new office,—and then, of his returns to Haggart—tired or

triumphant—on many a winter evening, of her glad rush into his arms, her sparkling face on his breast.—

Or again, he conjured up the scene when the MS. had been shown to Darrell,—his pretence of disapproval, his sham warnings, and the smile on his sallow face as he walked off with it. Ashe looked back to the early days of his friendship with Darrell; when he, Ashe, was one of the leaders of Eton, popular with the masters in spite of his incorrigible idleness, and popular with the boys because of his bodily prowess, and Darrell had been a small, sickly, bullied colleger. Scene after scene recurred to him; from their later relations at Oxford also. There was a kind of deliberation in the way in which he forced his thoughts into this channel; it made an outlet for a fierce bitterness of spirit, which some imperious instinct forbade him to spend on Kitty.

He dozed in the later hours of the night, and was roused by something touching his hand which lay outside the bed-clothes. Again the little head!—and the soft curls. Kitty was there,—crouched beside him,—weeping. There flashed into his mind an image of the night in London when she had come to him thus; and unwelcome as the whole remembrance was, he was conscious of a sudden swelling wave of pity and passion. What if he sprang up, caught her in his arms, forgave her, and bade the world go hang!

No! The impulse passed and in his turn he feigned sleep. The thought of her long deceit, of the selfish wilfulness wherewith she had requited deep love and easy trust, was too much; it seared his heart. And there was another and a subtler influence. To have forgiven so easily would have seemed treachery to those high ambitions and ideals from which—as he thought, only too certainly,—she had now cut him off. It was part of his surviving youth that the catastrophe seemed

to him so absolute. Any thought of the fresh efforts which would be necessary for the reconquering of his position, was no less sickening to him, than that of the immediate discomforts and humiliations to be undergone. He would go back to books and amusement; and in the idling of the future there would be plenty of time for love-making.

In the morning, when all preparations were made, the gondoliers waiting below, Ashe's telegram sent, and the circular notes handed over to Margaret French who had discreetly left the room, William approached his wife.

'Good-bye!' said Kitty, and gave him her hand, with a strange look and smile.

Ashe, however, drew her to him and kissed her,—against her will. 'I'll do my best, Kitty,'—he said, in a would-be cheery voice,—'to pull us through. Perhaps—I don't know!—things may turn out better than I think. Good-bye. Take care of yourself. I'll write of course. Don't hurry home. You'll want a fortnight or three weeks yet.'

Kitty said not a word, and in another minute he was gone. The Italian servants, congregated below at the water-gate sent laughing 'A rivederla's' after the handsome good-tempered Englishman, whom they liked and regretted; the gondola moved off; Kitty heard the plash of the water. But she held back from the window.

Half-way to the bend of the Canal beyond the Accademia, Ashe turned and gave a long look at the balcony. No one was there. But just as the gondola was passing out of sight, Kitty slipped on to the balcony. She could see only the figure of Piero the gondolier, and in another second the boat was gone. She stayed there for many minutes, clinging to the balustrade, and staring,

as it seemed, at the sparkle of autumnal sun which danced on the green water, and on the red palace to her right.

All the morning, Kitty on her sofa pretended to write letters. Margaret French, working or reading behind her, knew that she scarcely got through a single note, that her pen lay idle on the paper, while her eyes absently watched the palace windows on the other side of the Canal. Miss French was quite certain that some tragic cause of difference between the husband and wife had arisen. Kitty, the indiscreet, had for once kept her own counsel about the book, and Ashe had with his own hands packed away the volumes which had arrived the night before; so that she could only guess; and from that delicacy of feeling restrained her as much as possible.

Once or twice Kitty seemed on the point of unburdening herself. Then overmastering tears would threaten; she would break off and begin to write. At luncheon her look alarmed Miss French, so white was the little face, so large and restless the eyes. Ought Mr. Ashe to have left her, and left her apparently in anger? No doubt he thought her much better. But Margaret remembered the worst days of her illness, the anxious looks of the doctors, and the anguish that Kitty had suffered in the first weeks after her child's death. She seemed now indeed to have forgotten little Harry, so far as outward expression went; but who could tell what was passing in her strange unstable mind? And it often seemed to Margaret that the signs of the past summer were stamped on her indelibly, for those who had eyes to see.

Was it the perception of this pity beside her that drove Kitty to solitude and flight? At any rate she said after luncheon that she would go to Madame

d'Estrées, and did not ask Miss French to accompany her.

She set out accordingly, with the two gondoliers. But she had hardly passed the Accademia, before she bid her men take a cross cut to the Giudecca. On these wide waters, with their fresher air and fuller sunshine, a certain physical comfort seemed to breathe upon her.

'Piero!—it is not rough. Can we go to the Lido?' she asked the gondolier behind her.

Piero, who was all smiles and complaisance, as well he might be with a lady who scattered *lire* as freely as Kitty did, turned the boat at once for that channel 'Del Orfano' where the bones of the vanquished dead lie deep amid the ooze.

They passed San Giorgio, and were soon among the piles and sandbanks of the lagoon. Kitty sat in a dream which blotted the sunshine from the water. It seemed to her that she was a dead creature, floating in a dead world. William had ceased to love her. She had wrecked his career, and destroyed her own happiness. Her child had been taken from her. Lady Tranmore's affection had been long since alienated. Her own mother was nothing to her; and her friends in society, like Madeleine Alcot, would only laugh and gloat over the scandal of the book.

No,—everything was finished! As her fingers hanging over the side of the gondola felt the touch of the water, her morbid fancy, incredibly quick and keen, fancied herself drowned, or poisoned,—lying somehow white and cold, on a bed where William might see and forgive her.

Then with a start of memory which brought the blood rushing to her face, she thought of Cliffe standing beside the door of the great hall in the Vercelli palace,—she seemed to be looking again into those deep expressive eyes, held by the irony and the passion with which they were

infused. Had the passion any reference to her?—or was it merely part of the man's nature, as inseparable from it as flame from the volcano? If William had cast her off, was there still one man—wild and bad indeed, like herself, but poet and hero nevertheless,—who loved her?

She did not much believe it; but still the possibility of it lured her, like some dark gulf that promised her oblivion from this pain,—pain which tortured one so impatient of distress, so hungry for pleasure and praise.

In those days the Lido was still a noble and solitary shore, without the degradations of to-day.

Kitty walked fast and furiously across the sandy road, and over the shingles, turning, when she reached the firm sand, southward, towards Malamocco. It was between four and five, and the autumn afternoon was fast declining. A fresh breeze was on the sea, and the short waves, intensely blue under a wide clear heaven, broke in dazzling foam on the red-brown sand.

She seemed to be alone between sea and sky, save for two figures approaching from the south; a fisher-boy with a shrimping-net, and a man walking, bare-headed. She noticed them idly. A mirage of sun was between her and them, and the agony of remorse and despair which held her blunted all perceptions.

Thus it was that not till she was close upon him did her dazzled sight recognise Geoffrey Cliffe—

He saw her first, and stopped in motionless astonishment, on the edge of the sand. She almost ran against him, when his voice arrested her.

'Lady Kitty!'

She put her hand to her breast, wavered, and came to a standstill. He saw a little figure in black between him and those 'gorgeous towers and cloud-capped palaces' of Alpine snow, which dimly closed in the north; and beneath

the drooping hat a face even more changed and tragic than that which had haunted him since their meeting of the day before.

'How do you do?' she said, mechanically, and would have passed him. But he stood in her path. As he stared at her an impulse of rage ran through him, resenting the wreck of anything so beautiful,—rage against Ashe, who must surely be somehow responsible.

'Aren't you wandering too far, Lady Kitty?' His voice shook under the restraint he put upon it. 'You seem tired—very tired—and you are perhaps further from your gondola than you think.'

'I am not tired.'

He hesitated.

'Might I walk with you a little, or do you forbid me?'

She said nothing, but walked on. He turned and accompanied her. One or two questions that he put to her—Had she companions?—Where had she left her gondola?—remained unanswered. He studied her face, and at last he laid a strong hand upon her arm.

'Sit down. You are not fit for any more walking.'

He drew her towards some logs of driftwood on the upper sand, and she sank down upon them. He found a place beside her.

'What is the matter with you?' he said abruptly, with a harsh authority. 'You are in trouble.'

A tremor shook her,—as of the prisoner who feels on his limbs the first touch of the fetter.

'No, no!' she said, trying to rise; 'it is nothing. I—I didn't know it was so far. I must go home.'

His hand held her.

'Kitty!'

'Yes.' Her voice was scarcely audible.

'Tell me what hurts you! Tell me why you are here,

alone, with a face like that! Don't be afraid of me! Could I lift a finger to harm a mother that has lost her child? Give me your hands.' He gathered both hers into the warm shelter of his own. 'Look at me—trust me! My heart has grown, Kitty, since you knew me last. It has taken into itself so many griefs—so many deaths. Tell me your griefs, poor child!—tell me!'

He stooped and kissed her hands,—most tenderly, most gravely.

Tears rushed into her eyes. The wild emotions that were her being were roused beyond control. Bending towards him she began to pour out, first brokenly, then in a torrent, the wretched incoherent story, of which the mere telling, in such an ear, meant new treachery to William, and new ruin for herself.

CHAPTER XXII

On a certain cloudy afternoon, some ten days later, a fishing-boat with a patched orange sail might have been seen scudding under a light north-westerly breeze through the channels which connect the island of San Francesco with the more easterly stretches of the Venetian lagoon. The boat presently neared the shore of one of the cultivated *lidi*—islands formed out of the silt of many rivers by the travail of centuries, some of them still mere sand or mud banks, others covered by vineyards and fruit orchards, —which, with the *murazzi* or sea-walls of Venice stand sentinel between the city and the sea. On the *lido* along which the boat was coasting, the vintage was long since over and the fruit gathered; the last yellow and purple leaves in the orchards, 'a pestilence-stricken multitude,' were to-day falling fast to earth, under the sighing importunate wind. The air was warm; November was at its mildest. But all colour and light were drowned in floating mists, and darkness lay over the distant city. It was one of those drear and ghostly days which may well have breathed into the soul of Shelley that superb vision of the dead generations of Venice, rising, a phantom host, from the bosom of the sunset, and sweeping in 'a rapid masque of death' over the shadowed waters that saw the birth, and may yet furnish the tomb of so vast a fame.

Two persons were in the boat,—Kitty, wrapped in sables, her straying hair held close by a cap of the same

fur,—and Geoffrey Cliffe. They had been wandering in the lagoons all day, in order to escape from Venice and observers,—first at Torcello, then at San Francesco, and now they were ostensibly coming home in a wide sweep along the northern *lidi* and *murazzi*, that Cliffe might show his companion, from near by, the Porto del Lido, that exit from the lagoons where the salt lakes grow into the sea.

A certain wildness and exaltation, drawn from the solitudes around them and from their *tête-à-tête*, could be read in both the man and the woman. Cliffe watched his companion incessantly. As he lay against the side of the boat at her feet, he saw her framed in the curving sides of the stern, and could read her changing expressions. Not a happy face!—that he knew. A face haunted by shadows from an underworld of thought,—pursuing furies of remorse and fear. Not the less did he triumph that he had it *there*, in his power; nor had the flashes of terror and wavering will which he discerned, in any way diminished its beauty.

'How long have you known—that woman?' Kitty asked him suddenly, after a pause, broken only by the playing of the wind with the sail.

Cliffe laughed.

'The Ricci? Why do you want to know, Madame?'

She made a contemptuous lip.

'I knew her first,' said Cliffe, 'some years ago in Milan. She was then at "La Scala"—walking on—paid for her good looks. Then somebody sent her to Paris to the Conservatoire, which she only left this spring. This is her first Italian engagement. Her people are shopkeepers here,—in the Merceria,—which helped her. She is as vain as a peacock, and as dangerous as a pet panther.'

'Dangerous!' Kitty's scorn had passed into her voice.

'Well, Italy is still the country of the knife,'—said Cliffe, lightly,—'and I could still hire a bravo or two—in Venice—if I wanted them.'

'Does the Ricci hire them?'

Cliffe shrugged his shoulders.

'She'd do it without winking, if it suited her.' Then, after a pause—'Do you still wonder why I should have chosen her society?'

'Oh no,' said Kitty, hastily. 'You told me.'

'As much as a *friend* cares to know?'

She nodded—flushing, and dropped the subject.

Cliffe's mouth still smiled, but his eyes studied her with a veiled and sinister intensity.

'I have not seen the lady for a week,' he resumed. 'She pesters me with notes. I promised to go and see her in a new play to-morrow night, but——'

'Oh! go!' said Kitty—'by all means go!'

'"Ruy Blas" in Italian?—I think not.—Ah! did you see that gleam on the Campanile?—marvellous! . . . Miladi, I have a question to ask you.'

'*Dites!*' said Kitty.

'Did you put me into your book?'

'Certainly.'

'What kind of things did you say?'

'The worst I could!'

'Ah!—How shall I get a copy?' said Cliffe musing.

She made no answer, but she was conscious of a sudden movement—was it of terror? At the bottom of her soul was she indeed afraid of the man beside her?

'By the way—' he resumed—'you promised to tell me your news of this morning. But you haven't told me a word!'

She turned away. She had gathered her furs around her, and her face was almost hidden by them.

'Nothing is settled,' she said, in a cold, reluctant voice.

'Which means that you won't tell me anything more?

She was silent. Her lip had a proud line which piqued him.

'You think I am not worthy to know?'

Her eye gleamed.

'What does it matter to you?'

'Oh, nothing! I should have been glad to hear that all was well, and Ashe's mind at rest about his prospects.'

'His prospects!' she repeated, with a scorn which stung. 'How *dare* we mention his name here at all?'

Cliffe reddened.

'I dare,' he said calmly.

Kitty looked at him—a quivering defiance in face and frame; then bent forward—

'Would you like to know—who is the best—the noblest—the handsomest—the most generous—the most delightful man I have ever met?'

Each word came out winged and charged with a strange intensity of passion.

'Do I?' said Cliffe, raising his eyebrows—'do I want to know?'

Her look held him.

'My husband, William Ashe!'

And she fell back, flushed and breathless,—like one who throws out a rebel and challenging flag.

Cliffe was silent a moment, observing her.

'Strange!' he said at last. 'It is only when you are miserable you are kind. I could wish you miserable again, *chérie.*'

Tone and look broke into a sombre wildness before which she shrank. Her own violence passed away. She leant over the side of the boat, struggling with tears.

'Then you have your wish,' was her muffled answer.

The three bronzed Venetians, a father and two sons who were working the *bragozzo*, glanced curiously at the pair.

They were persuaded that these charterers of their boat were lovers flying from observation, and the unknown tongue did but stimulate guessing.

Cliffe raised himself impatiently.

They were nearing a point where the line of *murazzi* they had been following—low breakwaters of great strength—swept away from them outward and eastward towards a distant opening. On the other side of the channel was a low line of shore, broadening into the Lido proper, with its scattered houses and churches, and soon lost in the mist as it stretched towards the South.

'Ecco!—il Porto del Lido!' said the older boatman, pointing far away, to a line of deeper colour beneath a dark and lowering sky.

Kitty bent over the side of the boat staring towards the dim spot he showed her—where was the mouth of the sea.

'Kitty!'—said Cliffe's voice beside her, hoarse and hurried,—'One word, and I tell these fellows to set their helm for Trieste. This boat will carry us well—and the wind is with us.'

She turned and looked him in the face.

'And then?'

'Then? We'll think it out together, Kitty—together!' He bent his lips to her hand, bending so as to conceal the action from the sailors. But she drew her hand away.

'You and I'—she said, fiercely,—'would tire of each other in a week!'

'Have the courage to try! No!—you should not tire of me in a week! I would find ways to keep you mine, Kitty,—cradled, and comforted, and happy.'

'Happy!' Her slight laugh was the forlornest thing. 'Take me out to sea—and drop me there—with a stone round my neck. That might be worth doing—perhaps.'

He surveyed her unmoved.

'Listen, Kitty! This kind of thing can't go on for ever.'

'What are you waiting for?' she said, tauntingly. 'You ought to have gone last week.'

'I am not going'—he said, raising himself by a sudden movement—'till you come with me!'

Kitty started, her eyes riveted to his.

'And yet go I will! Not even you shall stop me, Kitty. I'll take the help I've gathered, back to those poor devils—if I die for it. But you'll come with me—you'll come!'

She drew back,—trembling under an impression she strove to conceal.

'If you will talk such madness, I can't help it,' she said, with shortened breath.

'Yes—you'll come!' he said, nodding. 'What have you to do with Ashe, Kitty, any longer? You and he are already divided. You have tried life together and what have you made of it? You're not fit for this mincing tripping London life—nor am I? And as for morals—I'll tell you a strange thing, Kitty.' He bent forward and grasped her hands with a force which hurt—from which she could not release herself. 'I believe—yes, by God, I believe!—that I am a better man than I was before I started on this adventure. It's been like drinking at last, at the very source of life—living, not talking about it. One bitter night last February, for instance, I helped a man—one of the insurgents—who had taken to the mountains with his wife and children—to carry his wife, a dying woman, over a mountain pass to the only place where she could possibly get help and shelter. We carried her on a litter, six men taking turns. The cold and the fatigue were such that I shudder now when I think of it. Yet at the end I seemed to myself a man re-born. I was happier than I had ever been in my life. Some mystic

virtue had flowed into me. Among those men and women, instead of being the selfish beast I've been all these years, I can forget myself. Death seems nothing—brotherhood—liberty!—everything! And yet'—

His face relaxed, became ironical, reflective. But he held the hands close, his grasp of them hidden by the folds of fur which hung about her.

'And *yet*—I can say to you without a qualm—put this marriage which has already come to nought behind you—and come with me! Ashe cramps you. He blames you—you blame yourself. What *reality* has all that? It makes you miserable—it wastes life. *I* accept your nature,—I don't ask you to be anything else than yourself—your wild, vain, adorable self! Ashe asks you to put restraint on yourself—to make painful efforts—to be good for his sake—the sake of something outside. *I* say—come and look at the elemental things,—death and battle—hatred, solitude, love. *They'll* sweep us out of ourselves!—no need to strive and cry for it—into the great current of the world's being—bring us close to the forces at the root of things—the forces which create—and destroy. Dip your heart in that stream, Kitty, and feel it grow in your breast. Take a nurse's dress—put your hand in mine—and come! I can't promise you luxuries or ease. You've had enough of those. Come and open another door in the House of Life! Take starving women and hunted children into your arms,—feel with them—weep with them—look with them into the face of death! Make friends with nature,—with rocks, forests, torrents,—with night and dawn, which you've never seen, Kitty! They'll love you,—they'll support you—the rough people—and the dark forests. They'll draw nature's glamour round you—they'll pour her balm into your soul. And I shall be with you—beside you!—your guardian—your lover—your *lover*, Kitty—till death do us part.'

He looked at her with the smile which was his only but sufficient beauty; the violent, exciting words flowed in her ear, amid the sound of rising waves and the distant talk of the fishermen. His hand crushed hers; his mad, imploring eyes repelled and constrained her. The wild hungers and curiosities of her being rushed to meet him; she heard the echo of her own words to Ashe—'more life—more *life!*—even though it lead to pain—and agony,—and tears!'

Then she wrenched herself away—suddenly, contemptuously.

'Of course that's all nonsense—romantic nonsense. You've perhaps forgotten that I am one of the women who don't stir without their maid.'

Cliffe's expression changed. He thrust his hands into his pockets.

'Oh well, if you must have a maid,' he said drily—'that settles it. A maid would be the deuce. And yet—I think I could find you a Bosnian girl—strong and faithful——'

Their eyes met,—his already full of a kind of ownership, tender, confident, humorous even,—hers alive with passionate anger and resistance.

'*Without a qualm!*' she repeated, in a low voice,—'without a qualm! Mon Dieu!'

She turned and looked towards the Adriatic.

'Where are we?' she said, imperiously.

For a gesture of command on Cliffe's part, unseen by her, had sent the boat eastward, spinning before the wind. The lagoon was no longer tranquil. It was covered with small waves; and the roar of the outer sea, though still far off, was already in their ears. The mist lifting, showed white distant crests of foam on a tumbling field of water, and to the north, clothed in tempestuous purple, the dim shapes of mountains.

Kitty raised herself, and beckoned towards the captain of the *bragozzo*.

'Giuseppe!'

'Commanda, Eccellenza!'

The man came forward.

With a voice sharp and clear, she gave the order to return at once to Venice. Cliffe watched her, the veins on his forehead swelling. She knew that he debated with himself whether he should give a counter-order, or no.

'A Venezia!' said Kitty, waving her hand towards the sailors, her eyes shining under the tangle of her hair.

The helm was put round, and beneath a tacking sail, the boat swept southward.

With an awkward laugh Cliffe fell back into his seat, stretching his long limbs across the boat. He had spoken under a strong and genuine impulse. His passion for her had made enormous strides in these few wild days beside her. And yet the fantastic poet's sense responded at a touch to the new impression. He shook off the heroic mood, as he had doffed his Bosnian cloak. In a few minutes, though the heightened colour remained, he was chatting and laughing as though nothing had happened.

She, exhausted physically and morally by her conflict with him, hardly spoke on the way home. He entertained her, watching her all the time—a hundred speculations about her passing through his brain. He understood perfectly how the insight which she had allowed him into her grief and her remorse had broken down the barriers between them. Her incapacity for silence, and reticence, had undone her. Was he a villain to have taken advantage of it?

Why? With a strange, half-cynical clearness he saw her, as the obstacle that she was, in Ashe's life and career. For Ashe—supposing he, Cliffe, persuaded her—

there would be no doubt a first shock of wrath and pain,—then? a sense of deliverance.—For her, too, deliverance! It excited his artist's sense to think of all the further developments through which he might carry that eager, plastic nature. There would be a new Kitty, with new capacities and powers. Wasn't that justification enough? He felt himself a sculptor in the very substance of life, moulding a living creature afresh, disengaging it from harsh and hindering conditions. What was there vile in that?

The argument pursued itself.

'The modern judges for himself—makes his own laws, as a god, knowing good and evil. No doubt in time a new social law will emerge—with new sanctions. Meanwhile here we are, in a moment of transition, manufacturing new types, exploring new combinations,—by which let those who come after, profit!'

Little delicate, distinguished thing!—every aspect of her, angry or sweet, sad or wilful, delighted his taste and sense. Moreover, she was *his* deliverance too,—from an ugly and vulgar entanglement of which he was ashamed. He shrank impatiently from memories which every now and then pursued him of the Ricci's coarse beauty, and exacting ways. Kitty had just appeared in time! He felt himself rehabilitated in his own eyes. Love may trifle as it pleases with what people call 'law'; but there are certain æsthetic limits not to be transgressed.

The Ricci of course was wild and thirsting for revenge. Let her! Anxieties far more pressing disturbed him. What if he tempted Kitty to this escapade,—and the rough life killed her? He saw clearly how frail she was.

But it was the artificiality of her life, the innumerable burdens of civilisation which had brought her to this! Women were not the weaklings they seemed, or believed themselves to be. For many of them, probably for Kitty, a rude and simple life would mean not only fresh mental,

but fresh physical strength. He had seen what women could endure, for love' or patriotism's sake! Make but appeal to the spirit,—the proud and tameless spirit—and how the flesh answered! He knew that his power with Kitty came largely from a certain Stoicism, a certain hardness, mingled, as he would prove to her, with a boundless devotion. Let him carry it through—without fears—and so enlarge her being and his own! And as to responsibilities beyond, as to their later lives—let time take care of its own births. For the modern determinist of Cliffe's type, there *is* no responsibility. He waits on life, following where it leads, rejoicing in each new feeling, each fresh reaction of consciousness on experience, and so links his fatalist belief to that Nietzsche doctrine of self-development at all costs, and the coming man, in which Cliffe's thought anticipated the years.

Kitty meanwhile listened to his intermittent talk of Venice, or Bosnia, with all its suggestions of new worlds, and far horizons; and scarcely said a word.

But through the background of the brain there floated with her, as with him, a procession of unspoken thoughts. She had received three letters from William. Immediately on his arrival, he had tendered his resignation. Lord Parham had asked him to suspend the matter for ten days. Only the pressure of his friends, it seemed, and the consternation of his party had wrung from Ashe a reluctant consent. Meanwhile all copies of the book had been bought up; the important newspapers had readily lent themselves to the suppression of the affair; private wraths had been dealt with by conciliatory lawyers; and in general a far more complete hushing-up had been attained than Ashe had ever imagined possible. There was no doubt infinite gossip in the country-houses. But sympathy for Kitty in her grief, for Ashe himself, and

Lady Tranmore had done much to keep it within bounds. The little Dean especially, beloved of all the world, had been incessantly active, on behalf of peace and oblivion.

All this Kitty read or guessed from William's letters. After all then, the harm had not been so great! Why such a panic!—such a hurry to leave her!—when she was ill—and sorry? And now how curtly, how measuredly he wrote! Behind the hopefulness of his tone, she read the humiliation and soreness of his mind,—and said to herself with a more headlong conviction than ever, that he would never forgive her.

No, *never*!—and especially now that she had added a thousandfold to the original offence. What did he know of that? Well, she was reckless as to his knowledge or ignorance. She had never written to him since his departure.—Margaret French too was angry with her,—had almost broken with her.

They left their boat on the Riva, and walked to the Piazza through the now starry dusk. As they passed the great door of St. Mark's, two persons came out of the church. Kitty recognised Mary Lyster and Sir Richard. She bowed slightly; Sir Richard put his hand to his hat in a flurried way; but Mary, looking them both in the face, passed without the smallest sign, unless the scorn in face and bearing might pass for recognition.

Kitty gasped.

'She cut me!' she said, in a shaking voice.

'Oh no!' said Cliffe,—'She didn't see you in the dark.

Kitty made no reply. She hurried along the northern side of the piazza avoiding the groups which were gathered in the sunset light round the flocks of feeding pigeons, brushing past the tables in front of the cafés, still well filled on this mild evening.

'Take care!' said Cliffe suddenly, in a low imperative voice.

Kitty looked up. In her abstraction she saw that she had nearly come into collision with a woman sitting at a café-table, and surrounded by a noisy group of men.

With a painful start Kitty perceived the mocking eyes of Mademoiselle Ricci. The Ricci said something in Italian, staring the while at the English lady; and the men near her laughed, some furtively, some loudly.

Cliffe's face set. 'Walk quickly!' he said in her ear, hurrying her past.

When they had reached one of the narrow streets behind the Piazza, Kitty looked at him—white and haughtily tremulous. 'What did that mean?'

'Why should you deign to ask?' was Cliffe's impatient reply. 'I have ceased to go and see her. I suppose she guesses why.'

'I will have no rivalry with Mademoiselle Ricci!' cried Kitty.

'You can't help it,' said Cliffe calmly. 'The powers of light are always in rivalry with the powers of darkness.'

And without further pleading or excuse he stalked on, his gaunt form and striking head towering above the crowded pavement. Kitty followed him with difficulty, conscious of a magnetism and a force against which she struggled in vain.

About a week afterwards Kitty shut herself up one evening in her room to write to Ashe. She had just passed through an agitating conversation with Margaret French who had announced her intention of returning to England at once, alone, if Kitty would not accompany her. Kitty's hands were trembling as she began to write.

'I am glad—oh! so glad, William,—that you *have* withdrawn your resignation,—that people have come forward so splendidly, and *made* you withdraw it—that Lord Parham is behaving decently—and that you have

been able to get hold of all those copies of the book. I always hoped it would not be quite so bad as you thought. But I know you must have gone through an awful time,—and I'm *sorry*.

'William, I want to tell you something,—for I can't go on lying to you,—or even just hiding the truth. I met Geoffrey Cliffe here,—before you left,—and I never told you. I saw him first in a gondola the night of the Serenata,—and then at the Armenian convent.—Do you remember my hurrying you and Margaret into the garden? That was to escape meeting him. And that same afternoon when I was in the unused rooms of the Palazzo Vercelli,—the rooms they show to tourists,—he suddenly appeared—and somehow I spoke to him, though I had never meant to do so again.

'Then when you left me, I met him again,—that afternoon—and he found out I was very miserable and made me tell him everything. I know I had no right to do so—they were your secrets as well as mine. But you know how little I can control myself,—it's wretched, but it's true.

'William, I don't know what will happen. I can't make out from Margaret whether she has written to you or not,—she won't tell me. If she has, this letter will not be much news to you. But, mind, I write it of my own free will, and not because Margaret may have forced my hand. I should have written it anyway. Poor old darling!—she thinks me mad and bad, and to-night she tells me she can't take the responsibility of looking after me any longer. Women like her can never understand creatures like me,—and I don't want her to. She's a dear saint, and as true as steel,—not like your Mary Lysters! I could go on my knees to her. But she can't control or save me. Not even you could, William. You've tried your best, and in spite of you I'm going to perdition, and I can't stop myself.

'For, William, there's something broken for ever between you and me. I know it was I who did the wrong, and that you had no choice but to leave me, when you did. But yet you *did* leave me, though I implored you not. And I know very well that you don't love me as you used to—why should you?—and that you never can love me in the same way again. Every letter you write tells me that. And though I have deserved it all, I can't bear it. When I think of coming home to England, and how you would try to be nice to me,—how good and dear and magnanimous you would be, and what a beast I should feel,—I want to drown myself and have done.

'It all seems to me so hopeless. It is my own nature,—the stuff out of which I am cut, that's all wrong. I may promise my breath away that I will be discreet and gentle and well-behaved, that I'll behave properly to people like Lady Parham, that I'll keep secrets, and not make absurd friendships with absurd people, that I'll try and keep out of debt and so on. But what's the use? It's the *will* in me—the something that drives, or ought to drive—that won't work. And nobody ever taught me or showed me, that I can remember, till I met you. In Paris at the Place Vendôme, half the time I used to live with Maman and Papa, be hideously spoilt, dressed absurdly, eat off silver plate, and make myself sick with rich things,—and then for days together Maman would go out or away, forget all about me, and I used to storm the kitchen for food. She either neglected me or made a show of me; she was my worst enemy, and I hated and fought her,—till I went to the Convent at ten. When I was fourteen Maman asked a doctor about me. He said I should probably go mad,—and at the Convent they thought the same. Maman used to throw this at me when she was cross with me.—

'Well, I don't repeat this to make you excuse me and

think better of me,—it's all too late for that—but because I am such a puzzle to myself, and I try to explain things. I *did* love you, William,—I believe I do still —but when I think of our living together again, my arms drop by my side, and I feel like a dead creature. Your life is too great a thing for me. Why should I spoil or hamper it? If you loved me, as you did once,— if you still thought *everything* worth while, then, if I had a spark of decency left, I might kill myself to free you, but I should never do—what I may do now. But William, you'll forget me soon. You'll pass great laws, and make great speeches, and the years when I tormented you,— and all my wretched ways,—will seem such a small small thing.

'Geoffrey says he loves me. And I think he does, though how long it will last, or may be worth, no one can tell. As for me, I don't know whether I love him. I have no illusions about him. But there are moments when he absolutely holds me,—when my will is like wax in his hands. It is because, I think, of a certain grand-ness— *grandeur* seems too strong—in his character. It was always there; because no one could write such poems as his without it. But now it's more marked, though I don't know that it makes him a better man. He thinks it does; but we all deceive ourselves. At any rate he is often superb, and I feel that I could die, if not for him, at least with him. And he is not unlikely to die in some heroic way. He went out as you know simply as correspondent and to distribute relief, but lately he has been fighting for these people—of course he has!—and when he goes back he is to be one of their regular leaders. When he talks of it he is noble, transformed. It reminds me of Byron—his wicked life here—and then his death at Missolonghi. Geoffrey can do such base cruel things,— and yet—

'But I haven't yet told you. He asks me to go with him, back to the fighting lines in Upper Bosnia. There seems to be a great deal that women can do. I shall wear a nurse's uniform, and probably nurse at a little hospital he founded,—high up in one of the mountain valleys. I know this will almost make you laugh. You will think of me, not knowing how to put on a button without Blanche,—and wanting to be waited on every moment. But you'll see, there'll be nothing of that sort. I wonder whether it's hardship I've been thirsting for all my life?—even when I seemed such a selfish, luxurious little ape.

'At the same time, I think it will kill me,—and that would be the best end of all. To have some great heroic experience, and then—"cease upon the midnight with no pain! . . ."

'Oh, if I thought you'd care very *very* much, I should have pain—horrible pain. But I know you won't. Politics have taken my place. Think of me sometimes, as I was when we were first married,—and of Harry—my little, little fellow!

'—Maman and I have had a ghastly scene. She came to scold me for my behaviour—to say I was the talk of Venice—*She!* Of course I know what she means. She thinks if I am divorced she will lose her allowance,—and she can't bear the thought of that, though Markham Warington is quite rich. My heart just *boiled* within me. I told her it is the poison of her life that works in me,—and that whatever I do, *she* has no right to reproach me. Then she cried—and I was like ice—and at last she went. Warington, good fellow, has written to me, and asked to see me. But what is the use?

'I know you'll leave me the 500*l.* a year that was settled on me. It'll be so good for me to be poor—and dressed in serge—and trying to do something else with these useless hands than writing books that break your

heart. I am giving away all my smart clothes. Blanche is going home. Oh William, William !—I'm going to shut this, and it's like the good-bye of death—a mean and ugly—*death.*

'. . . Later. They have just brought me a note from Danieli's. So Margaret did write to you, and your mother has come. Why did you send her, William? She doesn't love me—and I shall only stab and hurt her. Though I'll try not—for your sake.'

Two days later Ashe received almost by the same post which brought him the letter from Kitty, just quoted, the following letter from his mother :

'My dearest William,—I have seen Kitty. With some difficulty she consented to let me go and see her yesterday evening about nine o'clock.

'I arrived between six and seven, having travelled straight through without a break, except for an hour or two at Milan, and immediately on arriving I sent a note to Margaret French. She came in great distress, having just had a fresh scene with Kitty. Oh my dear William, her report could not well be worse. Since she wrote to us Kitty seems to have thrown over all precautions. They used to meet in churches or galleries, and go out for long days in the gondola or a fishing-boat together, and Kitty would come home alone and lie on the sofa through the evening, almost without speaking or moving. But lately he comes in with her, and stays hours, reading to her, or holding her hand, or talking to her in a low voice, and Margaret cannot stop it.

'Yet she has done her best, poor girl. Knowing what we all knew last year, it filled her with terror when she first discovered that he was in Venice, and that they had met. But it was not till it had gone on about a week with the strangest results on Kitty's spirits and nerves

that she felt she must interfere. She not only spoke to Kitty, but she spoke and wrote to him in a very firm dignified way. Kitty took no notice,—only became very silent and secretive. And he treated poor Margaret with a kind of courteous irony which made her blood boil, and against which she could do nothing. She says that Kitty seems to her sometimes like a person moving in sleep,—only half-conscious of what she is doing; and at others she is wildly excitable, irritable with everybody, and only calming down and becoming reasonable when this man appears.

'There is much talk in Venice. They seem to have been seen together by various London friends who knew —about the difficulties last year. And then of course everybody is aware that you are not here,—and the whole story of the book goes from mouth to mouth—and people say that a separation has been arranged—and so on. These are the kind of rumours that Margaret hears, especially from Mary Lyster, who is staying in this hotel with her father, and seems to have a good many friends here.

'Dearest William,—I have been lingering on these things because it is so hard to have to tell you what passed between me and Kitty. Oh! my dear dear son, take courage. Even now everything is not lost. Her conscience may awaken at the last moment, this bad man may abandon his pursuit of her, I may still succeed in bringing her back to you. But I am in terrible fear,—and I must tell you the whole truth.

'Kitty received me alone. The room was very dark,—only one lamp that gave a bad light,—so that I saw her very indistinctly. She was in black and as far as I could see, extremely pale and weary. And what struck me painfully was her haggard, careless look. All the little details of her dress and hair seemed so neglected.

Blanche says she is far too irritable and impatient in the mornings to let her hair be done as usual. She just rolls it into one big knot herself and puts a comb in it. She wears the simplest clothes and changes as little as possible. She says she is soon going to have done with all that kind of thing and she must get used to it. My own impression is that she is going through great agony of mind,—above all that she is ill,—ill in body and soul.

'She told me quite calmly however that she had made up her mind to leave you; she said that she had written to you to tell you so. I asked her if it was because she had ceased to love you. After a pause, she said "No." Was it because someone else had come between you? She threw up her head proudly, and said it was best to be quite plain and frank. She had met Geoffrey Cliffe again, and she meant henceforward to share his life. Then she went into the wildest dreams about going back with him to the Balkans, and nursing in a hospital, and dying—she hopes!—of hard work and privations. And all this in a torrent of words,—and her eyes blazing, with that look in them as though she saw nothing but the scenes of her own imagination. She talked of devotion—and of forgetting herself in other people. I could only tell her of course that all this sounded to me the most grotesque sophistry and perversion. She was forgetting her first duty, breaking her marriage vow, and tearing your life asunder. She shook her head, and said you would soon forget her. "If he had loved me, he would never have left me!" she said, again and again, with a passion I shall never forget.

'Of course that made me very angry, and I described what the situation had been when you reached London,—Lord Parham's state of mind—and the consternation caused everywhere by the wretched book. I tried to make her understand what there was at stake,—the hopes

of all who follow you in the House and the country—the great reforms of which you are the life and soul—your personal and political honour. I impressed on her the endless trouble and correspondence in which you had been involved,—and how meanwhile all your Home Office and Cabinet work had to be carried on as usual, till it was decided whether your resignation should be withdrawn or no. She listened with her head on her hands. I think with regard to the book she is most genuinely ashamed and miserable. And yet all the time there is this unreasonable, this monstrous feeling that you should not have left her!

'As to the scandalous references to private persons, she said that Madeleine Alcot had written to her about the country-house gossip. That wretched being Mr. Darrell seems also to have written to her, trying to save himself through her. And the only time I saw her laugh was when she spoke of having had a furious letter from Lady Grosville, about the references to Grosville Park. It was like the laugh of a mischievous unhappy child.

'Then we came back to the main matter and I implored her to let me take her home. First I gave her your letter. She read it, flushed up, and threw it away from her. "He commands me!" she said fiercely. "But I am no one's chattel." I replied that you had only summoned her back to her duty and her home, and I asked her if she could really mean to repay your unfailing love by bringing anguish and dishonour upon you? She sat dumb, and her stubbornness moved me so that I fear I lost my self-control and said more, much more—in denunciation of her conduct—than I had meant to do. She heard me out, and then she got up and looked at me very bitterly and strangely. I had never loved her she said, and so I could not judge her. Always from the beginning I had thought her unfit to be your wife, and

she had known it, and my dislike of her especially during the past year had made her hard and reckless. It had seemed no use trying. I just wanted her dead, that you might marry a wife who would be a help and not a stumbling-block. Well, I should have my wish, for she would soon be as good as dead, both to you and to me.

'All this hurt me deeply, and I could not restrain myself from crying. I felt so helpless, and so doubtful whether I had not done more harm than good. Then she softened a little, and asked me to let her go to bed—she would think it all over and write to me in the morning. . . .

'So! my dear William, I can only pray and wait. I am afraid there is but little hope, but God is merciful and strong. He may yet save us all.

'But whatever happens, remember that you have nothing to reproach yourself with—that you have done all that man could do. I should telegraph to you in the morning to say "Come,—at all hazards,"—but that I feel sure all will be settled to-morrow one way or the other. Either Kitty will start with me,—or she will go with Geoffrey Cliffe. You could do nothing—absolutely nothing. God help us! She seems to have some money, and she told me that she counted on retaining her jointure.'

On the night following her interview with Lady Tranmore, Kitty went from one restless tormented dream into another, but towards morning she fell into one of a different kind. She dreamt she was in a country of great mountains. The peaks were snow-crowned, vast glaciers filled the chasms on their flanks, forests of pines clothed the lower sides of the hills, and the fields below were full of spring flowers. She saw a little Alpine village, and a church with an old and slender campanile. A plain stone building stood by—it seemed to be an inn of the old-fashioned sort, and she entered it. The dinner-

table was ready in the low-roofed *salle-à-manger*, and as she sat down to eat, she saw that two other guests were at the same table. She glanced at them, and perceived that one was William, and the other her child Harry, grown older,—and transfigured. Instead of the dull and clouded look which had wrung her heart in the old days, against which she had striven, patiently and impatiently, in vain, the blue eyes were alive with mind and affection. It was as if the child beheld his mother for the first time and she him. As he recognised her, he gave a cry of joy, waving one hand towards her while with the other he touched his father on the arm. William raised his head. But when he saw his wife his face changed. He rose from his seat, and drawing the little boy into his arms he walked away. Kitty saw them disappear into a long passage, indeterminate and dark. The child's face over his father's shoulder was turned in longing towards his mother, and as he was carried away he stretched out his little hands to her in lamentation.

Kitty woke up bathed in tears. She sprang out of bed, and threw the window nearest to her open to the night. The winter night was mild, and a full moon sailed the southern sky. Not a sound on the water, not a light in the palaces; a city of ebony and silver, Venice slept in the moonlight. Kitty gathered a cloak and some shawls round her, and sank into a low chair, still crying and half-conscious. At his inn, some few hundred yards away, between her and the Piazzetta, was Geoffrey Cliffe waking too?—making his last preparations? She knew that all his stores were ready, and that he proposed to ship them and the twenty young fellows, Italians and Dalmatians who were going with him to join the insurgents, that morning, by a boat leaving for Cattaro. He himself was to follow twenty-four hours later, and it was his firm and confident expectation that Kitty would go with

him,—passing as his wife. And indeed Kitty's own arrangements were almost complete, her money in her purse, the clothes she meant to take with her packed in one small trunk, some of the Tranmore jewels which she had been recently wearing ready to be returned on the morrow to Lady Tranmore's keeping, other jewels, which she regarded as her own, together with the remainder of her clothes, put aside in order to be left in the custody of the landlady of the apartment, till Kitty should claim them again.

One more day,—which would probably see the departure of Margaret French; one more wrestle with Lady Tranmore and all the links with the old life would be torn away. A bare stripped soul, dependent henceforth on Geoffrey Cliffe for every crumb of happiness, treading in unknown paths, suffering unknown things, probing unknown passions and excitements—it was so she saw herself; not without that corroding double consciousness of the modern, that it was all very interesting and as such to be forgiven and admired.

Notwithstanding what she had said to Ashe she did believe—with a clinging and desperate faith—that Cliffe loved her. Had she really doubted it, her conduct would have been inexplicable, even to herself, and he must have seemed a madman. What else could have induced him to burden himself with a woman on such an errand and at such a time? She had promised indeed to be his lieutenant and comrade,—and to return to Venice if her health should be unequal to the common task. But in spite of the sternness with which he put that task first,—a sternness which was one of his chief attractions for Kitty,—she knew well that her coming threw a glamour round it which it had never yet possessed, that the passion she had aroused in him, and the triumph of binding her to his fate possessed him—for the moment at

any rate—heart and soul. He had the poet's resources too, and a mind wherewith to organise and govern. She shrank from him still, but she already envisaged the time when her being would sink into and fuse with his, and like two colliding stars they would flame together to one fiery death.

Thoughts like these ran in her mind. Yet all the time she saw the high mountains of her dream, the old inn, the receding face of her child on William's shoulder; and the tears ran down her cheeks. The letter from William that Lady Tranmore had given her lay on a table near. She took it up, and lit a candle to read it.

'Kitty—I bid you come home. I should have started for Venice an hour ago after reading Miss French's letter, but that honour and public duty keep me here. But mother is going, and I implore and command you, as your husband, to return with her. Oh Kitty, have I ever failed you?—have I ever been hard with you?—that you should betray our love like this? Was I hard when we parted—a month ago? If I was, forgive me, I was sore pressed. Come home, you poor child, and you shall hear no reproaches from me. I think I have nearly succeeded in undoing your rash work. But what good will that be to me, if you are to use my absence for that purpose to bring us both to ruin? Kitty, the grass is not yet green on our child's grave. I was at Haggart last Sunday, and I went over in the dusk to put some flowers upon it. I thought of you without a moment's bitterness, and prayed for us both, if such as I may pray. Then next morning came Miss French's letter. Kitty, have you no heart—and no conscience? will you bring disgrace on that little grave?—will you dig between us the gulf which is irreparable, across which your hand and mine can never touch each other any more? I cannot and I will not believe it. Come back to me!—come back.'

She re-read it with a melting heart,—with deep shaking sobs. When she first glanced through it the word 'command' had burnt into her proud sense; the rest passed almost unnoticed. Now the very strangeness in it as coming from William,—the strangeness of its grave and deep emotion, held and grappled with her.

Suddenly—some tension of the whole being seemed to give way. Her head sank back on the chair, she felt herself weak and trembling, yet happy as a soul new-born, into a world of light. Waking dreams passed through her brain in a feverish succession, reversing the dream of the night—images of peace, and goodness and reunion.

Minutes—hours—passed. With the first light, she got up feebly, found ink and paper and began to write.

. . . . . .

From Lady Tranmore to William Ashe:

'Oh! my dearest William—at last a gleam of hope.—

'No letter this morning. I was in despair. Margaret reported that Kitty refused to see anyone,—had locked her door, and was writing. Yet no letter came. I made an attempt to see Geoffrey Cliffe, who is staying at the "Germania," but he refused. He wrote me the most audacious letter to say that an interview could only be very painful, that he and Kitty must decide for themselves, that he was waiting every hour for a final word from Kitty. It rested with her, and with her only. Coercion in these matters was no longer possible, and he did not suppose that either you or I would attempt it.

'And now comes this blessed note,—a respite at least! "*I am going to Verona to-night with Blanche. Please let no one attempt to follow me. I wish to have two days alone—absolutely alone. Wait here. I will write. K.*"

'. . . Margaret French too has just been here. She

was almost hysterical with relief and joy,—and you know what a calm self-controlled person she is. But her dear round face has grown white, and her eyes behind her spectacles look as though she had not slept for nights. She says that Kitty will not see her. She sent her a note by Blanche to ask her to settle all the accounts, and told her that she should not say good-bye,—it would be too agitating for them both. In two days she should hear. Meanwhile the maid Blanche is certainly going with Kitty; and the gondola is ordered for the Milan train this evening.

'2 P.M. There is one thing that troubles me and I must confess it. I did not see that across Kitty's letter in the corner was written "Tell *nobody* about this letter." And Polly Lyster happened to be with me when it came. She has been *au courant* of the whole affair, for the last fortnight; that is, as an onlooker. She and Kitty have only met once or twice since Mary reached Venice; but in one way or another she has been extraordinarily well informed. And, as I told you, she came to see me directly I arrived, and told me all she knew. You know her old friendship for us, William? She has many weaknesses, and of late I have thought her much changed, grown very hard and bitter. But she is always *very* loyal to you and me,—and I could not help betraying my feeling when Kitty's note reached me. Mary came and put her arms round me, and I said to her "Oh, Mary, thank God!—she's broken with him! She's going to Verona to-night on the way home!" And she kissed me and seemed so glad. And I was very grateful to her for her sympathy, for I am beginning to feel my age, and this has been rather a strain. But I oughtn't to have told her!—or anybody! I see of course what Kitty meant. It is incredible that Mary should breathe a word,—or if she did that it should reach that man. But I have just

sent her a note to Danieli's to warn her in the strongest way.—

'Beloved son,—if indeed we save her,—we will be very good to her, you and I. We will remember her bringing up, and her inheritance. I will be more loving—more like Christ. I hope He will forgive me for my harshness in the past. . . . My William!—I love you so. God be merciful to you and to your poor Kitty!'

. . . . . .

'Will the Signora have her dinner outside or in the *salle-à-manger*?'

The question was addressed to Kitty by a little Italian waiter, belonging to the Albergo San Zeno at Verona, who stood bent before her, his white napkin under his arm.

'Out here, please,—and for my maid also.'

The speaker moved wearily towards the low wall which bounded the foaming Adige, and looked across the river. Far away the Alps that look down on Garda glistened under the stars; the citadel on its hill, the houses across the river were alive with lights; to the left the great mediæval bridge rose, a dark ponderous mass, above the torrents of the Adige. Overhead, the little outside restaurant was roofed with twining vine-stems from which the leaves had fallen; coloured lights twinkled among them, and on the white tables underneath. The night was mild and still, and a veiled moon was just rising over the town of Juliet.

'Blanche!'

'Yes, my lady?'

'Bring a chair, Blanchie, and come and sit by me.'

The little maid did as she was told and Kitty slipped her hand into hers with a long sigh.

'Are you very tired, my lady?'

'Yes,—but don't talk!'

The two sat silent, clinging to each other.

A step on the cobble-stones disturbed them. Blanche looked up, and saw a gentleman issuing from a lane which connected the narrow quay whereon stood the old Albergo San Zeno with one of the main streets of Verona.

There was a cry from Kitty. The stranger paused,—looked—advanced. The little maid rose, half-fierce, half-frightened.

'Go Blanche, go!' said Kitty panting; 'go back into the hotel.'

'Not unless your ladyship wishes me to leave you,'—said the girl firmly.

'Go at once!' Kitty repeated, with a peremptory gesture. She herself rose from her seat, and with one hand resting on the table, awaited the new comer. Blanche looked at her; hesitated; and went.

Geoffrey Cliffe came to Kitty's side. As he approached her, his eyes fastened on the loveliness of her attitude, her fair head. In his own expression, there was a visionary fantastic joy; it was the look of the dreamer who, for once, finds in circumstance and the real, poetry adequate and overflowing.

'Kitty!—why did you do this?' he said to her passionately, as he caught her hand.

Kitty snatched it away, trembling under his look. She began the answer she had devised while he was crossing the flagged quay towards her. But Cliffe paid no heed. He laid a hand on her shoulder, and she sank back powerless into her chair, as he bent over her.

'Cruel—cruel child, to play with me so! Did you mean to put me to a last test?—or did your hard little heart misgive you at the last moment? I cross-examined your landlady,—I bribed the servants—the gondoliers.—Not a word! They were loyal—or you

had paid them better. I went back to my hotel in black despair. Oh you artist!—you plotter! Kitty,—you shall pay me this some day! And there—there on my table—all the time—lay your little crumpled note!'

'What note?'—she gasped—'what note?'

'Actress!' he said, with an amused laugh.

And cautiously, playfully, lest she should snatch it from him, he unfolded it before her.

Without signature and without date, the soiled half-sheet contained this message, written in Italian and in a disguised handwriting:

'Too many spectators. Come to Verona to night. K.'

Kitty looked at it, and then at the face beside her,—infused with a triumphant power and passion. She seemed to shrink upon herself, and her head fell back against one of the supports of the *pergola*. One of the blue lights from above fell with ghastly effect upon the delicate tilted face and closed eyes. Cliffe bent over her in a sharp alarm; and saw that she had fainted away.

CLIFFE IN VENICE

PART V

REQUIESCAT

'Pluck, pluck cypress, O pale maidens,
Dusk the hall with yew!'

CHAPTER XXIII

'How strange!' thought the Dean, as he once more stepped back into the street to look at the front of the Home Secretary's house in Hill Street. 'He is certainly in town.'

For according to the 'Times,' William Ashe the night before had been hotly engaged in the House of Commons fighting an important Bill, of which he was in charge, through Committee. Yet the blinds of the house in Hill Street were all drawn, and the Dean had not yet succeeded in getting anyone to answer the bell.

He returned to the attack, and this time a charwoman appeared. At sight of the Dean's legs and apron, she dropped a curtsey or something like one, informing him that they had workmen in the house and Mr. Ashe was 'staying with her Ladyship.'

The Dean took the Tranmores' number in Park Lane and departed thither, not without a sad glance at the desolate hall behind the charwoman, and at the darkened windows of the drawing-room overhead. He thought of that May day two years before, when he had dropped in to lunch with Lady Kitty; his memory, equally effective whether it summoned the detail of an English chronicle, or the features of a face once seen, placed firm and clear before him the long-chinned fellow at Lady Kitty's left, to whose villainy that empty and forsaken house bore cruel witness. And the little lady herself,—what a radiant and ethereal beauty! Ah me! ah me!

He walked on in meditation, his hands behind his back. Even in this May London, the little Dean was capable of an abstracted spirit, and he had still much to think over. He had his appointment with Ashe. But Ashe had written—evidently in a press of business—from the House, and had omitted to mention his temporary change of address. The Dean regretted it. He would rather have done his errand with Lady Kitty's injured husband on some neutral ground, and not in Lady Tranmore's house.

At Park Lane, however, he was immediately admitted.

'Mr. Ashe will be down directly, sir,' said the butler, as he ushered the visitor into the commodious library on the ground floor which had witnessed for so long the death-in-life of Lord Tranmore. But now Lord Tranmore was bedridden upstairs, with two nurses to look after him, and to judge from the aspect of the tables piled with letters and books, and from the armful of papers which a private secretary carried off with him as he disappeared before the Dean, Ashe was now fully at home in the room which had been his father's.

There was still a fire in the grate, and the small Dean, who was a chilly mortal, stood on the rug looking nervously about him. Lord Tranmore had been in office himself, and the room with its book-shelves filled with volumes in worn calf bindings, its solid writing-tables, and leather sofas, its candlesticks and inkstands of old silver, slender and simple in pattern, its well-worn Turkey carpet and its political portraits,—'the Duke,' Johnny Russell, Lord Althorp, Peel, Melbourne,—seemed to the observer on the rug, steeped in the typical habit and reminiscence of English public life.

Well, if the father, poor fellow, had been distinguished in his day, the son had gone far beyond him. The Dean

ruminated on a conversation wherewith he had just beguiled his cup of tea at the Athenæum—a conversation with one of the shrewdest members of Lord Parham's Cabinet, a 'new man,' and an enthusiastic follower of Ashe.

'Ashe is magnificent! At last our side has found its leader. Oh! Parham will disappear with the next appeal to the country. He is getting too infirm! Above all, his eyes are nearly gone; his oculist I hear gives him no more than six months' sight, unless he throws up. Then Ashe will take his proper place, and if he doesn't make his mark on English history, I'm a Dutchman. Oh! of course that affair last year was an awful business,—the two affairs! When Parliament opened in February, there were some of us who thought that Ashe would never get through the Session. A man so changed, so struck down, I have seldom seen. You remember what a handsome boy he was, up to last year even! Now he's a middle-aged man. All the same, he held on, and the House gave him that quiet sympathy and support that it can give when it likes a fellow. And gradually you could see the life come back into him,—and the ambition. By George! he did well in that Trade Union business before Easter, and the Bill that's on now,—it's masterly, the way in which he's piloting it through! The House positively likes to be managed by him; it's a sight worthy of our best political traditions. Oh yes, Ashe will go far; and, thank God, that wretched little woman,—what has become of her, by the way?—has neither crushed his energy, nor robbed England of his services. But it was touch and go.'

To all of which the Dean had replied little or nothing. But his heart had sunk within him; and the doubtfulness of a certain enterprise in which he was engaged had appeared to him in even more startling colours than before.

However, here he was. And suddenly as he stood before the fire, he bowed his white head, and said to himself a couple of verses from one of the Psalms for the day:—

> Who will lead me into the strong city: who will bring me into Edom?
> O be thou our help in trouble: for vain is the help of man.

The door opened; and the Dean straightened himself impetuously, every nerve tightening to its work.

'How do you do, my dear Dean,' said Ashe, enclosing the frail ascetic hand in both his own. 'I trust I have not kept you waiting. My mother was with me. Sit there, please: you will have the light behind you.'

'Thank you. I prefer standing a little, if you don't mind,—and I like the fire.'

Ashe threw himself into a chair, and shaded his eyes with his hand. The Dean noticed the strains of grey in his curly hair, and that aspect, as of something withered and wayworn, which had invaded the man's whole personality, balanced indeed by an intellectual dignity and distinction which had never been so commanding. It was as though the stern and constant wrestle of the mind had burnt away all lesser things,—the old easy grace, the old careless pleasure in life.

'I think you know'—began the Dean, clearing his throat,—'why I asked you to see me?'

'You wished, I think, to speak to me—about my wife,' said Ashe with difficulty.

Under his sheltering hand, his eyes looked straight before him, into the fire.

The Dean fidgeted a moment, lifted a small Greek vase on the mantelpiece and set it down,—then turned round,—

'I heard from her ten days ago,—the most piteous letter. As you know I had always a great regard for her. The news of last year was a sharp sorrow to me—as though she had been a daughter. I felt I must see her. So I put myself into the train and went to Venice.'

Ashe started a little, but said nothing.

'Or rather to Treviso, for, as I think you know, she is there with Lady Alice.'

'Yes, that I had heard.'

The Dean paused again, then moved a little nearer to Ashe, looking down upon him.

'May I ask—stop me if I seem impertinent—how much you know of the history of the winter?'

'Very little!' said Ashe, in a low voice. 'My mother got some information from the English Consul at Trieste who is a friend of hers,—to whom it seems Lady Kitty applied; but it did not amount to much.'

The Dean drew a small note-book from a breast pocket and looked at some entries in it.

'They seem to have reached Marinitza in November. If I understood aright, Lady Kitty had no maid with her?'

'No. The maid Blanche was sent home from Verona.'

'How Lady Kitty ever got through the journey!—or the winter!' said the Dean, throwing up his hands. 'Her health of course is irreparably injured. But that she did not die a dozen times over, of hardship and misery,—is the most astonishing thing! They were in a wretched village, nearly four thousand feet up, a village of wooden huts, with a wooden hospital. All the winter nearly, they were deep in snow, and Lady Kitty worked as a nurse. Cliffe seems to have been away fighting, very often, and at other times came back to rest and see to supplies.'—

'I understand she passed as his wife?' said Ashe.

The Dean made a sign of reluctant assent.

'They lived in a little house near the hospital. She tells me that after the first two months she began to loathe him, and she moved into the hospital to escape him. He tried at first to melt and propitiate her; but when he found that it was no use, and that she was practically lost to him, he changed his temper and he might have behaved to her like the tyrant he is, but that her hold over the people among whom they were living, both on the fighting men and the women, had become by this time greater than his own. They adored her, and Cliffe dared not ill-treat her. And so it went on through the winter. Sometimes they were on more friendly terms than at others. I gather that when he showed his dare-devil heroic side she would relent to him, and talk as though she loved him. But she would never go back—to live with him; and that after a time alienated him completely. He was away more and more; and at last she tells me there was a handsome Bosnian girl,—and well,—you can imagine the rest. Lady Kitty was so ill in March that they thought her dying, but she managed to write to this Consul you spoke of at Trieste, and he sent up a doctor and a nurse. But this you probably know?'

'Yes,' said Ashe hoarsely. 'I heard that she was apparently very ill when she reached Treviso, but that she had rallied under Alice's nursing. Lady Alice wrote to my mother.'

'Did she tell Lady Tranmore anything of Lady Kitty's state of mind?' said the Dean after a pause.

Ashe also was slow in answering. At last he said—

'I understand there has been great regret for the past.'

'Regret!' cried the Dean, 'If ever there was a terrible case of the dealings of God with a human soul!—'

He began to walk up and down impetuously, wrestling with emotion.

'Did she give you any explanation,' said Ashe

presently, in a voice scarcely audible—'of their meeting at Verona? You know my mother believed—that she had broken with him—that all was saved. Then came a letter from the maid, written at Kitty's direction to say that she had left her mistress—and they had started for Bosnia.'

'No, I tried. But she seemed to shrink with horror from everything to do with Verona. I have always supposed that fellow in some way got the information he wanted—bought it, no doubt—and pursued her. But that she honestly meant to break with him, I have no doubt at all.'

Ashe said nothing.

'Think'—said the Dean—'of the effect of that man's sudden appearance—of his romantic and powerful personality—your wife alone, miserable—doubting your love for her——'

Ashe raised his hand, with a gesture of passion.

'If she had had the smallest love left for me, she could have protected herself! I had written to her—she knew——'

His voice broke. The Dean's face quivered.

'My dear fellow—God knows—' He broke off. When he recovered composure, he said—

'Let us go back to Lady Kitty. Regret is no word to express what I saw. She is consumed by remorse night and day. She is also still—as far as my eyes can judge—desperately ill. There is probably lung trouble caused by the privations of the winter. And the whole nervous system is shattered.'

Ashe looked up. His aspect showed the effect of the words.

'Every provision shall be made for her,' he said, in a voice muffled and difficult. 'Lady Alice has been told already to spare no expense,—to do everything that can be done.'

'There is only one thing that can be done for her,' said the Dean.

Ashe did not speak.

'There is only one thing that you or anyone else could do for her,'—the Dean repeated slowly,—'and that is to love—and forgive her!' His voice trembled.

'Was it her wish that you should come to me?' said Ashe after a moment.

'Yes. I found her at first very despairing,—and extremely difficult to manage. She regretted she had written to me, and neither Lady Alice nor I could get her to talk. But one day,'—the old man turned away, looking into the fire, with his back to Ashe, and with difficulty pursued his story,—'one day, whether it was the sight of a paralysed child that used to come to Lady Alice's lace-class, or some impression from the service of the Mass to which she often goes in the early mornings with her sister, I don't know, but she sent for me—and—and broke down entirely. She implored me to see you, and to ask you if she might live at Haggart, near the child's grave. She told me that according to every doctor she has seen, she is doomed, physically. But I don't think she wants to work upon your pity. She herself declares that she has much more vitality than people think, and that the doctors may be all wrong. So that you are not to take that into account. But if you will so far forgive her as to let her live at Haggart, and occasionally to go and see her, that would be the only happiness to which she could now look forward, and she promises that she will follow your wishes, in every respect, and will not hinder or persecute you in any way.'

Ashe threw up his hands in a melancholy gesture. The Dean understood it to mean a disbelief in the ability of the person promising to keep such an engagement. His face flushed—he looked uncertainly at Ashe.

'For my part,'—he said quickly,—'I am not going to advise you for a moment to trust to any such promise.'

Rising from his seat, Ashe began to pace the room. The Dean followed him with his eyes, which kindled more and more.

'But'—he resumed—'I none the less urge and implore you to grant Lady Kitty's prayer.'

Ashe slightly shook his head. The little Dean drew himself together.

'May I speak to you—with a full frankness? I have known and loved you from a boy. And,'—he stopped a moment, then said simply,—'I am a Christian minister.'

Ashe, with a sad and charming courtesy, laid his hand on the old man's arm.

'I can only be grateful to you,' he said and stood waiting.

'At least you will understand me,' said the Dean. 'You are not one of the small souls. Well—here it is! Lady Kitty has been an unfaithful wife. She does not attempt to deny or cover it. But in my belief she loves you still, and has always loved you. And when you married her, you must I think have realised that you were running no ordinary risks. The position and antecedents of her mother,—the bringing up of the poor child herself,—the wildness of her temperament, and the absence of anything like self-discipline and self-control, must surely have made you anxious? I certainly remember that Lady Tranmore was full of fears.'

He looked for a reply.

'Yes'—said Ashe,—'I was anxious. Or rather I saw the risks clearly. But I was in love, and I thought that love could do everything.'

The Dean looked at him curiously—hesitated—and at last said—

'Forgive me. Did you take your task seriously

enough?—did you give Lady Kitty all the help you might?'

The blue eyes scanned Ashe's face. Ashe turned away, as though the words had touched a sore.

'I know very well—' he said unsteadily—'that I seemed to you and others a weak and self-indulgent fool. All I can say is, it was not in me to play the tutor and master to my wife.'

'She was so young, so undisciplined,' said the Dean earnestly. 'Did you guard her as you might?'

A touch of impatience appeared in Ashe.

'Do you really think, my dear Dean—' he said, as he resumed his walk up and down,—'that one human being has, ultimately, any decisive power over another? If so, I am more of a believer in—fate—or liberty—I am not sure which—than you.'

The Dean sighed.

'That you were infinitely good and loving to her we all know.'

'"Good"—"loving"?' said Ashe, under his breath, with a note of scorn. 'I—'

He restrained himself, hiding his face as he hung over the fire.

There was a silence, till the Dean once more placed himself in Ashe's path. 'My dear friend—you saw the risks, and yet you took them! You made the vow "for better, for worse." My friend, you have so to speak, lost your venture! But, let me urge on you that the obligation remains!'

'What obligation?'

'The obligation to the life you took into your own hands,—to the soul you vowed to cherish,' said the Dean, with an apostolic and passionate earnestness.

Ashe stood before him, pale, and charged with resolution.

'That obligation—has been cancelled,—by the laws of your own Christian faith, no less than by the ordinary laws of society.'

'I do not so read it!' cried the Dean with vivacity. 'Men say so, "for the hardness of their hearts." But the Divine pity which transformed men's idea of marriage could never have meant to lay it down that in marriage alone there was to be no forgiveness.'

'You forget your text,' said Ashe, steadily. '"Saving for the cause—"' His voice failed him.

'Permissive!' was the Dean's eager reply,—'permissive only. There are cases, I grant you,—cases of impenitent wickedness—where the higher law is suspended, finds no chance to act,—where relief from the bond is itself mercy and justice. But the higher law is always there. You know the formula—"It was said by them of old time—But *I* say unto you"—And then follows the new law of a new society. And so in marriage. If love has the smallest room to work—if forgiveness can find the narrowest foothold—love and forgiveness are imposed on—demanded of—the Christian!—here as everywhere else. Love and forgiveness,—*not* penalty and hate!'

'There is no question of hate—and—I doubt whether I am a Christian,' said Ashe quietly, turning away.

The Dean looked at him a little askance—breathing fast.

'But you are a *heart*, William!' he said, using the privilege of his white hairs, speaking as he might have spoken to the Eton boy of twenty years before—'Aye, and one of the noblest. You gathered that poor thing into your arms—knowing what were the temptations of her nature, and she became the mother of your child. Now—alas! those temptations have conquered her. But she

still turns to you—she still clings to you—and she has no one else. And if you reject her, she will go down unforgiven and despairing to the grave.'

For the first time Ashe's lips trembled. But his speech was very quiet and collected.

'I must try and explain myself,' he said. 'Why should we talk of forgiveness? It is not a word that I much understand, or that means much to men of my type and generation. I see what has happened in this way. Kitty's conduct last year hit me desperately hard. It destroyed my private happiness, and but for the generosity of the best friends ever man had, it would have driven me out of public life. I warned her that the consequences of the Cliffe matter would be irreparable, and she still carried it through. She left me for that man,—and at a time when by her own action it was impossible for me to defend either her or myself. What course of action remained to me? I *did* remember her temperament, her antecedents, and the certainty that this man, whatever might be his moments of heroism, was a selfish and incorrigible brute in his dealings with women. So I wrote to her, through this same Consul at Trieste. I let her know that if she wished it, and if there were any chance of his marrying her, I would begin divorce proceedings at once. She had only to say the word. If she did not wish it, I would spare her and myself the shame and scandal of publicity. And if she left him, I would make additional provision for her which would ensure her every comfort. She never sent a word of reply, and I have taken no steps. But as soon as I heard she was at Treviso I wrote again,—or rather this time my lawyers wrote, suggesting that the time had come for the extra provision I had spoken of, which I was most ready and anxious to make.'

He paused.

'And this'—said the Dean—'is all? This is in fact your answer to me?'

Ashe made a sign of assent.

'Except'—he added, with emotion,—'that I have heard, only to-day, that if Kitty wishes it, her old friend, Miss French will go out to her at once, nurse her, and travel with her as long as she pleases. Miss French's brother has just married and she is at liberty. She is most deeply attached to Kitty, and as soon as she heard Lady Alice's report of her state, she forgot everything else. Can you not persuade—Kitty,'—he looked up urgently—'to accept her offer?'

'I doubt it,' said the Dean sadly. 'There is only one thing she pines for, and without it she will be a sick child crossed. Ah! well,—well! So to allow her to share your life again—however humbly and intermittently—is impossible?'

It seemed to the Dean that a shudder passed through the man beside him.

'Impossible,' said Ashe, sharply. 'But not only for private reasons.'

'You mean your public duty stands in the way?'

'Kitty left me of her own free will. I have put my hand to the plough again,—and I cannot turn back. You can see for yourself that I am not at my own disposal,—I belong to my party, to the men with whom I act, who have behaved to me with the utmost generosity.'

'Of course Lady Kitty could no longer share your public life. But at Haggart—in seclusion?'

'You know what her personality is—how absorbing—how impossible to forget! No,—if she returned to me, on any terms whatever, all the old conditions would begin again. I should inevitably have to leave politics.'

'And that—you are not prepared to do?'

The Dean wondered at his own audacity, and a touch of proud surprise expressed itself in Ashe.

'I should have preferred to put it that I have accepted great tasks and heavy responsibilities—and that I am not my own master.'

The Dean watched him closely. Across the field of imagination there passed the figure of one who 'went away sorrowful, having great possessions' and his heart—the heart of a child or a knight-errant—burned within him.

But before he could speak again the door of the room opened, and a lady in black entered. Ashe turned towards her.

'Do you forbid me, William?' she said quietly—'or may I join your conversation?'

Ashe held out his hand and drew her to him. Lady Tranmore greeted her old friend the Dean, and he looked at her overcome with emotion and doubt.

'You have come to us at a critical moment,' he said,—'and I am afraid you are against me.'

She asked what they had been discussing, though indeed, as she said, she partly guessed. And the Dean, beginning to be shaken in his own cause, repeated his pleadings with a sinking heart. They sounded to him stranger and less persuasive than before. In doing what he had done he had been influenced by an instinctive feeling that Ashe would not treat the wrong done him as other men might treat it, that, to put it at the least, he would be able to handle it with an ethical originality, to separate himself in dealing with it from the mere weight of social tradition. Yet now as he saw the faces of mother and son together,—the mother leaning on the son's arm—and realised all the strength of the social ideas which they represented, even though, in Ashe's case, there had been a certain individual flouting of them, futile and powerless in the end,—the Dean gave way.

'There—there!' he said, as he finished his plea, and Lady Tranmore's sad gravity remained untouched. 'I see you both think me a dreamer of dreams!—'

'Nay, dear friend!' said Lady Tranmore, with the melancholy smile which lent still further beauty to the refined austerity of her face; 'these things seem possible to you, because you are the soul of goodness'—

'And a pious old fool to boot!' said the Dean impatiently. 'But I am willing—like St. Paul and my betters—to be a fool for Christ's sake. Lady Tranmore! are you, or are you not a Christian?'

'I hope so,' she said with composure, while her cheek flushed. 'But our Lord did not ask impossibilities. He knew there were limits to human endurance—and human pardon—though there might be none to God's.'

'"Be ye perfect, as your Father which is in heaven is perfect,"' cried the Dean. 'Where are the limits there?'

'There are other duties in life besides that to a wife who has betrayed her husband,' she said steadily. 'You ask of William what he has not the strength to give. His life was wrecked, and he has pieced it together again. And now he has given it to his country. That poor guilty child has no claim upon it.'

'But understand,' said Ashe, interposing, with an energy that seemed to express the whole man,—'while I live, *everything*—short of what you ask,—that can be done to protect or ease her, shall be done.—Tell her that.'

His features worked painfully. The Dean took up his hat and stick.

'And may I tell her too'—he said pausing,—'that you forgive her?'

Ashe hesitated.

'I do not believe,' he said at last, 'that she would attach any more meaning to that word than I do. She would think it unreal. What's done is done.'

The Dean's heart leapt up in the typical Christian challenge to the fatal and the irrevocable. While life lasts the lost sheep can always be sought and found; and love, the mystical wine, can always be poured into the wounds of the soul, healing and re-creating! But he said no more. He felt himself humiliated and defeated.

Ashe and Lady Tranmore took leave of him with an extreme gentleness and affection. He would almost rather they had treated him ill. Yes, he was an optimist and a dreamer!—one who had indeed never grappled in his own person with the worst poisons and corrosions of the soul. Yet still, as he passed along the London streets — marked here and there by the newspaper placards which announced Ashe's Committee triumphs of the night before—he was haunted anew by the immortal words:—

'One thing thou lackest,' . . . 'and Come, follow me!'

Ah!—could he have done such a thing himself? or was he merely the scribe carelessly binding on other men's shoulders things grievous to be borne? The answering passion of his faith mounted within him,—joined with a scorn for the easy conditions, and happy, scholarly pursuits of his own life,—and a thirst, which in the early days of Christendom, would have been a thirst for witness, and for martyrdom.

Three days later, the Dean,—a somewhat shrunken and diminished figure, in ordinary clerical dress, without the buckles and silk stockings that typically belonged to him,—stood once more at the entrance of a small villa, outside the Venetian town of Treviso.

He was very weary, and as he sought disconsolately through all his pockets for the wherewithal to pay his fly, while the spring rain pattered on his wideawake, he

produced an impression, as of some delicate draggled thing, which would certainly have gone to the heart of his adoring wife could she have beheld it. The Dean's ways were not Sybaritic. He pecked at food and drink like a bird; his clothes never caused him a moment's thought; and it seemed to him a waste of the night to use it for sleeping. But none the less did he go through life finely looked after. Mrs. Winston dressed him, took his tickets and paid his cabs, and without her it was an arduous matter for the Dean to arrive at any destination whatever. As it was, in the journey from Paris, he had lost one of the two bags which Mrs. Winston had packed for him, and he looked remorsefully at the survivor as it was deposited on the steps beside him.

It did not, however, remain on the steps. For when Lady Alice's maid-housekeeper appeared, she informed the Dean, with a certain flurry of manner, that the ladies were not at home. They had gone off that morning—suddenly—to Venice, leaving a letter for him, should he arrive.

'*Fermate!*' cried the Dean, turning towards the cab, which was trailing away, and the man, who had been scandalously overpaid, came back with alacrity, while the Dean stepped in to read the letter.

When he came out again, he was very pale, and in a great haste. He bade the man replace the bag and drive him at once to the railway station.

On the way thither he murmured to himself 'horrible! —horrible!'—and both the letter and a newspaper which had been enclosed in it shook in his hands.

He had half an hour to wait before the advent of the evening train for Venice, and he spent it in a quiet corner poring over the newspaper. And not that newspaper only, for he presently became aware that all the small ill-printed sheets offered him by an old newsvendor in

the station were full of the same news, and some with later detail,—nay that the people walking up and down in the station were eagerly talking of it.

An Englishman had been assassinated in Venice. It seemed that a body had been discovered early on the preceding morning floating in one of the small canals connecting the Fondamente Nuove with the Grand Canal. It had been stabbed in three places; two of the wounds must have been fatal. The papers in the pocket identified the murdered man as the famous English traveller, poet, and journalist, Mr. Geoffrey Cliffe. Mr. Cliffe had just returned from an arduous winter in the Balkans, where he had rendered superb service to the cause of the Bosnian insurgents. He was well known in Venice, and the terrible event had caused a profound sensation there. No clue to the outrage had yet been obtained. But Mr. Cliffe's purse and watch had not been removed.

The Dean arrived in Venice by the midnight train and went to the hotel on the Riva whither Lady Alice had directed him. She was still up, waiting to see him, and in the dark passage outside Kitty's door she told him what she knew of the murder. It appeared that late that night a startling arrest had been made,—of no less a person than the Signorina Ricci, the well-known actress of the Apollo theatre, and of two men supposed to have been hired by her for the deed. This news was still unknown to Kitty,—she was in bed, and her companion had kept it from her.

'How is she?' asked the Dean.

'Frightfully excited,—or else dumb. She let me give her something to make her sleep. Strangely enough, she said to me this morning on the way from Treviso—'It is a woman!—and I know her.'

The following day, when the Dean entered the dingy hotel sitting-room, a thin figure in black came hurriedly

out of the bedroom beside it, and Kitty caught him by the hand.

'Isn't it horrible?' she said, staring at him with her changed dark-rimmed eyes. 'She tried once, in Bosnia. One of the Italians who came out with us—she had got hold of him.—Do you think—he suffered?'

Her voice was quite quiet. The Dean shuddered.

'One of the stabs was in the heart,' he said. 'But try and put it from you, Lady Kitty. Sit down.' He touched her gently on the shoulder.

Kitty nodded.

'Ah then—' she said—'*then* he couldn't have suffered —could he? I'm glad.'

She let the Dean put her in a chair, and clasping her hands round her knees she seemed to pursue her own thoughts.

Her aspect affected him almost beyond bearing. Ashe's brilliant wife?—London's spoilt child?—this withered tragic little creature, of whom it was impossible to believe that, in years, she was not yet twenty-four? So bewildered in mind, so broken in nerve was she, that it was not till he had sat with her some time, now entering perforce into the cloud of horror that brooded over her, now striving to drag her from it, that she asked him about his visit to England.

He told her, in a faltering voice.

She received it very quietly, even with a little, queer, twisting laugh.

'I thought he wouldn't. Was Lady Tranmore there?'

The Dean replied that Lady Tranmore had been there.

'Ah then of course there was no chance,' said Kitty. 'When one is as good as that, one never forgives.'

She looked up quickly. 'Did William say he forgave me?'

The Dean hesitated.

'He said a great deal that was kind and generous.'

A slight spasm passed over Kitty's face.

'I suppose he thought it ridiculous to talk of forgiving. So did I—once.'

She covered her eyes with her hands,—removing them to say impatiently—

'One can't go on being sorry every moment of the day. No, one can't! Why are we made so? William would agree with me there.'

'Dear Lady Kitty!' said the Dean tenderly—'God forgives—and with Him there is always hope, and fresh beginning.'

Kitty shook her head.

'I don't know what that means,' she said. 'I wonder whether'—she looked at him with a certain piteous and yet affectionate malice,—'if you'd been as deep as I, whether *you*'d know.'

The Dean flushed. The hidden wound stung again—Had he then no right to speak? He felt himself the elder son of the parable—and hated himself anew.

But he was a Christian, on his Master's business. He must obey orders, even though he could feel no satisfaction, or belief in himself,—though he seem to himself such a shallow and perfunctory person. So he did his tender best for Kitty. He spent his loving, enthusiastic, pitiful soul upon her; and while he talked to her she sat with her hands crossed on her lap, and her eyes wandering through the open window to the forest of masts outside, and the dancing wavelets of the lagoon. When at last he spoke of the further provision Ashe wished to make for her, when he implored her to summon Margaret French she shook her head. 'I must think what I shall do,' she said quietly, and a minute afterwards with a flash of her old revolt—'He cannot prevent my going to Harry's grave!'

Early the following morning the murdered man was carried to the cemetery at San Michele. In spite of some attempt on the part of the police to keep the hour secret, half Venice followed the black-draped barca, which bore that flawed poet and dubious hero to his rest.

It was a morning of exceeding beauty. On the mean and solitary front of the Casa dei Spiriti there shone a splendour of light; the lagoon was azure and gold; the mainland a mist of trees in their spring leaf; while far away the cypresses of San Francesco, the slender tower of Torcello, and the long line of Murano,—and further still the majestic wall of silver Alps—greeted the eyes that loved them, as the ear is soothed by the notes of a glorious and yet familiar music.

Amid the crowd of gondolas that covered the shallow stretch of lagoon between the northernmost houses of Venice and the island graveyard, there was one which held two ladies. Alice Wensleydale was there against her will, and her pinched and tragic face showed her repulsion and irritation. She had endeavoured in vain to dissuade Kitty from coming; but in the end she had insisted on accompanying her. Possibly as the boat glided over the water amid a crowd of laughing, chattering Italians, the silent Englishwoman was asking herself what was to be the future of the trust she had taken on herself. Kitty in her extremity had remembered her half-sister's promise, and had thrown herself upon it. But a few weeks' experience had shown that they were strange and uncongenial to each other. There was no true affection between them,—only a certain haunting instinct of kindred. And even this was weakened or embittered by those memories in Alice's mind, which Kitty could never approach, and Alice never forget. What was she to do with her half-sister,

stranded and dishonoured as she was?—How content or comfort her?—How live her own life beside her?

Kitty sat silent, her eyes fixed upon the barca which held the coffin under its pall. Her mind was the scene of an infinite number of floating and fragmentary recollections; of the day when she and Cliffe had followed the *murazzi* towards the open sea; of the meeting at Verona; of the long winter, with its hardship and its horror; and that hatred and contempt which had sprung up between them. Could she love no one, cling faithfully to no one? And now the restless brain, the vast projects, the mixed nature, the half-greatness of the man, had been silenced,—crushed—in a moment, by the stroke of a knife. He had been killed by a jealous woman,—because of his supposed love for another woman, whose abhorrence, in truth, he had earned in a few short weeks. There was something absurd mingled with the horror,—as though one watched the prank of a demon.

Her sensuous nature was tormented by the thought of the last moment. Had he had time to feel despair—the thirst for life? She prayed not. She thought of the Sunday afternoon at Grosville Park, when they had tried to play billiards, and Lord Grosville had come down on them; or she saw him sitting opposite to her, at supper, on the night of the fancy ball, in the splendid Titian dress, while she gloated over the thoughts of the trick she had played on Mary Lyster;—or bending over her, when she woke from her swoon at Verona. Had she ever really loved him for one hour?—and if not, what possible excuse, before gods or men, was there for this ugly self-woven tragedy into which she had brought herself and him,—merely because her vanity could not bear that William had not been able to love her, for long, far above all her deserts?

William! Her heart leapt in her breast. He was

thirty-six—and she not twenty-four. A strange and desolate wonder overtook her, as the thought seized her of the years they might still spend on the same earth,—members of the same country, breathing the same air—and yet for ever separate. Never to see him—or speak to him again!—the thought stirred her imagination, as it were, while it tortured her; there was in it a certain luxury and romance of pain.

Thus, as she followed Cliffe to his last bloodstained rest, did her mind sink in dreams of Ashe,—and in the dismal reckoning up of all that she had so lightly and inconceivably lost. Sometimes she found herself absorbed in a kind of angry marvelling at the strength of the old moral commonplaces.

It had been so easy and so exciting to defy them. Stones which the builders of life reject,—do they still avenge themselves in the old way? There was a kind of rage in the thought.

On the way home, Kitty expressed a wish to go into St. Mark's alone. Lady Alice left her there, and in the shadow of the atrium Kitty looked at her strangely, and kissed her.

An hour after Lady Alice had reached the hotel, a letter was brought to her. In it Kitty bade her—and the Dean—farewell, and asked that no effort should be made to track her. 'I am going to friends—where I shall be safe and at peace. Thank you both with all my heart. Let no one think about me any more.'

Of course they disobeyed her. They made what search in Venice they could, without rousing a scandal, and Ashe rushed out to join it, using the special means at a Minister's disposal. But it was fruitless. Kitty vanished like a wraith in the dawn; and the living world of action and affairs knew her no more.

CHAPTER XXIV

'WELL, I must have a carriage!' said William Ashe to the landlord of one of the coaching inns of Domo Dossola —'and if you can't give me one for less, I suppose I shall have to pay this most ridiculous charge. Tell the man to put to at once.'

The landlord who owned the carriages, and would be sitting snugly at home while the peasant on the box faced the elements in consideration of a large number of extra francs to his master, retired with a deferential smile, and told Emilio to bring the horses.

Meanwhile Ashe finished an indifferent dinner, paid a large bill, and went out to survey the preparations for departure, so far as the pelting rain in the courtyard would let him. He was going over the Simplon, starting rather late in the day, and the weather was abominable. His valet Richard Dell kept watch over the luggage and encouraged the ostlers, with a fairly stoical countenance. He was an old traveller, and though he would have preferred not to travel in a deluge, he disliked Italy, as a country of sour wine, and would be glad to find himself across the Alps. Moreover, he knew the decision of his master's character, and being a man of some ability and education he took a pride in the loftiness of the affairs on which Ashe was generally engaged. If Mr. Ashe said that he *must* get to Geneva the following morning, and to London the morning after, on important business,—why he *must*, and it was no good talking about weather.

They rattled off through the streets of Domo Dossola, Dell in front with the driver, under a waterproof hood and apron, Ashe in the closed landau behind, with a plentiful supply of books, newspapers, and cigars to while away the time.

At Isella, the frontier village, he took advantage of the Custom-house formalities and of a certain lull in the storm to stroll a little in front of the inn. On the Italian side looking east, there was a certain wild lifting of the clouds, above the lower course of the stream descending from the Gondo ravine; upon the distant meadows and mountain slopes that marked the opening of the Tosa valley, storm-lights came and went, like phantom deer chased by the storm-clouds; beside him, the swollen river thundered past, seeking a thirsty Italy; and behind, over the famous Gondo cleft, lay darkness, and a pelting tumult of rain.

Ashe turned back to the carriage bidding a silent farewell to a country he did not love; a country mainly significant to him of memories which rose like a harsh barrier between his present self and a time when he too fleeted life carelessly like other men, and found every hour delightful. Never, as long as he lived, should he come willingly to Italy. But his mother this year had fallen into such an exhaustion of body and mind, caused by his father's long agony, that he had persuaded her to let him carry her over the Alps to Stresa,—a place she had known as a girl and of which she often spoke—for a Whitsuntide holiday. He himself was no longer in office. A coalition between the Tories and certain dissident Liberals had turned out Lord Parham's government in the course of a stormy autumn session, some eight months before. It had been succeeded by a weak Administration, resting on two or three loosely knit groups,—with Ashe as leader of the Opposition. Hence

his comparative freedom, and the chance to be his mother's escort.

But at Stresa he had been overtaken by some startling political news, news which seemed to foreshadow an almost immediate change of Ministry; and urgent telegrams bade him return at once. The coalition on which the Government relied had broken down; the resignation of its chief, a 'transient and embarrassed phantom,' was imminent; and it was practically certain, in the singular dearth of older men on his own side, since the retirement of Lord Parham, that within a few weeks if not days Ashe would be called upon to form an Administration. . . .

The carriage was soon on its way again, and presently in the darkness of the superb ravine that stretches west and north from Gondo, the tumult of wind and water was such that even Ashe's slackened pulses felt the excitement of it. He left the carriage, and wrapped in a waterproof cape, breasted the wind along the water's edge. Wordsworth's magnificent lines in the 'Prelude,' dedicated to this very spot, came back to him, as to one who in these later months had been able to renew some of the literary habits and recollections of earlier years.

—Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light!—

But here on this wild night were only tumult and darkness; and if Nature in this aspect were still to be held, as Wordsworth makes her, the Voice and Apocalypse of God, she breathed a power pitiless and terrible to man. The fierce stream below, the tiny speck made by the carriage and horses straining against the hurricane of wind, the forests on the further bank climbing to endless heights of rain, the flowers in the rock crannies, lashed and torn, the gloom and chill which had thus blotted out a June evening: all these impressions were impressions

of war, of struggle and attack, of forces unfriendly and overwhelming.

A certain restless and melancholy joy in the challenge of the storm, indeed, Ashe felt, as many another strong man has felt before him, in a similar emptiness of heart. But it was because of the mere provocation of physical energy which it involved; not, as it would have been with him in youth, because of the infinitude and vastness of Nature, breathing power and expectation into man :—

> Effort, and expectation and desire,—
> And something evermore about to be!

He flung the words upon the wind, which scattered them as soon as they were uttered, merely that he might give them a bitter denial, reject for himself, now and always, the temper they expressed. He had known it well, none better!—gone to bed, and risen up with it—the mere joy in the 'mere living.' It had seasoned everything, twined round everything, great and small; a day's trout-fishing, or deer-stalking; a new book, a friend, a famous place; then politics, and the joys of power.

Gone! Here he was, hurrying back to England, to take perhaps in his still young hand the helm of her vast fortunes; and of all the old 'expectation and desire,' the old passion of hope, the old sense of the magic that lies in things unknown and ways untrodden, he seemed to himself now incapable. He would do his best, and without the political wrestle, life would be too trifling to be borne; but the relish and the savour were gone, and all was grey.

Ah!—he remembered one or two storm-walks with Kitty in their engaged or early married days,—in Scotland chiefly. As he trudged up this Swiss pass, he could see stretches of Scotch heather under drifting mist,

and feel a little figure in its tweed dress flung suddenly, by the wind and its own soft will, against his arm. And then, the sudden embrace, and the wet fragrant cheek, and her voice,—mocking and sweet!

Oh! God, where was she now? The shock of her disappearance from Venice had left in some ways a deeper mark upon him than even the original catastrophe. For who that had known her could think of such a being, alone, in a world of strangers, without a peculiar dread and anguish? That she was alive, he knew, for her five hundred a year—and she had never accepted another penny from him since her flight—was still drawn on her behalf by a banking firm in Paris. His solicitors, since the failure of their first efforts to trace her after Cliffe's death, had made repeated inquiries; Ashe had himself gone to Paris to see the bankers in question. But he was met by their solemn promise to Kitty to keep her secret inviolate. Madame d'Estrées supplied him with the name of the convent in which Kitty had been brought up; but the Mother-superior denied all knowledge of her. Meanwhile no course of action on Kitty's part could have restored her so effectually to her place in Ashe's imagination. She haunted his days and nights. So also did his memory of the Dean's petition. Insensibly, without argument, the whole attitude of his mind thereto had broken down; since he had been out of office, and his days and nights were no longer absorbed in the detail of administration and Parliamentary leadership, he had been the defenceless prey of grief; yearning and pity and agonised regret, rising from the deep sub-conscious self, had overpowered his first recoil and determination; and in the absence of all other passionate hope, the one desire and dream which still lived warm and throbbing at his heart was the dream that still in some crowd, or loneliness, he might again,

before it was too late, see Kitty's face, and the wildness of Kitty's eyes.

And he believed much the same process had taken place in his mother's feeling. She rarely spoke of Kitty; but when she did the doubt and soreness of her mind were plain. Her own life had grown very solitary. And in particular the old friendship between her and Polly Lyster had entirely ceased to be. Lady Tranmore shivered when she was named, and would never herself speak of her if she could help it. Ashe had tried in vain to make her explain herself. Surely it was incredible that she could in any way blame Mary for the incident at Verona? Ashe of course remembered the passage in his mother's letter from Venice, and they had the maid Blanche's report to Lady Tranmore, of Kitty's intentions when she left Venice, of her terror when Cliffe appeared,—of her swoon. But he believed with the Dean that any treacherous servant could have brought about the catastrophe. Vincenzo, one of the gondoliers who took Kitty to the station, had seen the luggage labelled for Verona; no doubt Cliffe had bribed him; and this explanation was indeed suggested to Lady Tranmore by the maid. His mother's suspicion,—if indeed she entertained it,—was so hideous, that Ashe finding it impossible to make his own mind harbour it for an instant, was harrowed by the mere possibility of its existence; as though it represented some hidden sore of consciousness that refused either to be probed or healed.

As he laboured on against the storm, all thought of his present life and activities dropped away from him; he lived entirely in the past. 'What is it in me,' he thought, 'that has made the difference between my life and that of other men I know—that weakened me so with Kitty?' He canvassed his own character, as a third person might have done.

The Christian, no doubt, would say that his married life had failed, because God had been absent from it, because there had been in it no consciousness of higher law, of compelling grace.

Ashe pondered what such things might mean. 'The Christian—in speculative belief—fails under the challenge of life as often as other men. Surely it depends on something infinitely more primitive and fundamental than Christianity?—something out of which Christianity itself springs? But this something,—does it really exist,—or am I only cheating myself, by fancying it? Is it, as all the sages have said, the pursuit of some eternal good, the identification of the self with it,—the "dying to live"? And is this the real meaning at the heart of Christianity? —at the heart of all religion?—the everlasting meaning, let science play what havoc it please with outward forms and statements?'

Had he, perhaps, *doubted the soul?*

He groaned aloud. 'Oh my God, what matter that *I* should grow wise—if Kitty is lost and desolate?'

And he trampled on his own thoughts,—feeling them a mere hypocrisy and offence.

As they left the Gondo ravine, and began to climb the zigzag road to the Simplon inn, the storm grew still wilder, and the driver, with set lips and dripping face, urged his patient beasts against a deluge. The road ran rivers; each torrent, carefully channelled, that passed beneath it, brought down wood and soil in choking abundance; and Ashe watched the downward push of the rain on the high exposed banks above the carriage. Once they passed a fragment of road which had been washed away; the driver pointing to it said something sulkily about '*frane*' on the 'other side.'

This bad moment, however, proved to be the last and worst, and when they emerged upon the high valley in

which stands the village of Simplón, the rain was already lessening, and the clouds rolling up the great sides and peaks of the Fletschhorn. Ashe promised himself a comparatively fine evening and a rapid run down to Brieg.

Outside the old Simplon posting-house, however, they presently came upon a crowd of vehicles of every description, of which the drivers were standing in groups with dripping rugs across their shoulders,—shouting and gesticulating.

And as they drove up, the news was thundered at them in every possible tongue. Between the hospice and Bérizal two hundred metres of road had been completely washed away. The afternoon diligence had just got through by a miracle an hour before the accident occurred; before anything else could pass, it would take at least ten or twelve hours' hard work, through the night, before the labourers now being requisitioned by the Commune could possibly provide even a temporary passage.

Ashe in despair went into the inn to speak with the landlord, and found that unless he was prepared to abandon books and papers, and make a push for it over mountain paths covered deep in fresh snow, there was no possible escape from the dilemma. He must stay the night. The navvies were already on their way; and as soon as ever the road was passable he should know. For not even a future Prime Minister of England, could Herr Ludwig do more.

He and Dell went gloomily up the narrow stone stairs of the inn to look at the bedrooms, which were low-roofed, and primitive, penetrated everywhere by the roar of a stream which came down close behind the inn. Through the open door of one of the rooms Ashe saw the foaming mass, framed as it were in a window, and almost in the house.

He chose two small rooms looking on the street, and

bade Dell get a fire lit in one of them, a bed moved out, an arm-chair moved in, and as large a table set for him as the inn could provide, while he took a stroll before dinner. He had some important letters to answer, and he pointed out to Dell the bag which contained them.

Then he stepped out into the muddy street, which was still a confusion of horses, vehicles, and men, and turning up a path behind the inn was soon in solitude. An evening of splendour! Nature was still in a tragic declamatory mood—sending piled thunder-clouds of dazzling white across a sky extravagantly blue, and throwing on the high snowfields and craggy tops a fierce flame-coloured light. The valley was resonant with angry sound, and the village, now in shadow, with its slender crumbling campanile, seemed like a cowering thing, over which the eagle has passed.

The grandeur and the freshness, the free elemental play of stream and sky and mountain seized upon a man in whom the main impulses of life were already weary, and filled him with an involuntary physical delight. He noticed the flowers at his feet, in the drenched grass which was already lifting up its battered stalks and along the margins of the streams; deep-blue columbines, white lilies, and yellow anemones. Incomparable beauty lived and breathed in each foot of pasture; and when he raised his eyes from the grass they fed on visionary splendours of snow and rock, stretching into the heavens.

No life visible. Except a line of homing cattle, led by a little girl, with tucked-up skirt and bare feet. And—in the distance—the slender figure of a woman walking, —stopping often to gather a flower,—or to rest? Not a woman of the valley clearly. No doubt a traveller weather-bound like himself at the inn. He watched the figure a little, for some vague grace of movement that seemed to enter into and make a part of that high beauty

in which the scene was steeped; but it disappeared behind a fold of pasture, and he did not see it again.

In spite of the multitude of vehicles gathered about the inn there were not so many guests in the *salle-à-manger*, when Ashe entered it, as he had expected. He supposed that a majority of these vehicles must be return carriages from Brieg. Still there was much clatter of talk and plates, and German seemed to be the prevailing tongue. Except for a couple whom Ashe took to be a Genevese professor and his wife, there was no lady in the room.

He lingered somewhat late at table, toying with his orange and reading a 'Journal de Genève' captured from a neighbour, which contained an excellent 'London letter.' The room emptied. The two Swiss handmaidens came in to clear away soiled linen and arrange the tables for the morning's coffee. Only at a further table, a *couvert* for one person, set by itself, remained still untouched.

He happened to be alone in the room when the door again opened and a lady entered. She did not see him behind his newspaper, and she walked languidly to the further table, and sat down. As she did so, she was seized with a fit of coughing, and when it was over she leaned her head on her hands, gasping.

Ashe had half risen; the newspaper was crushed in his hand; when the Swiss waitress whom the men of the inn called Fräulein Anna,—who was indeed the daughter of the landlord,—came back.

'How are you, Madame?' she said with a smile, and in a slow English of which she was evidently proud.

'I'm better to-day,' said the other, hastily. 'I shall start to-morrow. What a noise there is to-night!'—she added, in a tone both fretful and weary.

'We are so full,—it is the accident to the road, Madame. Will Madame have a *thé complet* as before?'

The lady nodded, and Fräulein Anna, who evidently

knew her ways, brought in the tea at once, stayed chatting beside her for a minute and then departed, with a long disapproving look at the gentleman in the corner who was so long over his coffee and would not let her clear away.

Ashe made a fierce effort to still the thumping in his breast, and decide what he should do. For the guests there was only one door of entrance or exit, and to reach it he must pass close beside the new comer.

He laid down his newspaper. She heard the rustling, and involuntarily looked round.

There was a slight sound,—an exclamation. She rose. He heard and saw her coming, and sat tranced and motionless, his eyes bent upon her. She came tottering, clinging to the chairs, her hand on her side, till she reached the corner where he was.

'William!'—she said, with a little glad sob, under her breath—'William!'

He himself could not speak. He stood there gazing at her, his lips moving without sound. It seemed to him that she turned her head a moment, as though to look for someone beside him,—with an exquisite tremor of the mouth.

'Isn't it strange?' she said in the same guarded voice. 'I had a dream once,—a valley—and mountains—and an inn. You sat here—just like this—and——'

She put up her hands to her eyes a moment, shivered and withdrew them. From her expression she seemed to be waiting for him to speak. He moved and stood beside her.

'Where can we talk?' he said with difficulty.

She shook her head vaguely, looking round her with that slight frown, complaining and yet sweet, which was like a touch of fire on memory.

The waitress came back into the room.

'It *is* odd to have met you here!' said Kitty in a laughing voice. 'Let us go into the Salon de Lecture.

The maids want to clear away. Please bring your newspaper.'

Fräulein Anna looked at them with a momentary curiosity, and went on with her work. They passed into the passage-way inside, which was full of smokers overflowing from the crowded room beyond, where the humbler frequenters of the inn ate and drank.

Kitty glanced round her in bewilderment. 'The Salon de Lecture will be full too. Where shall we go?' she said, looking up.

Ashe's hand clenched, as it hung beside him. The old gesture—and the drawn emaciated face—they pierced the heart.

'I told my servant to arrange me a sitting-room upstairs,' he said hurriedly, in her ear. 'Will you go up first—No. 10.'

She nodded, and began slowly to mount the stairs, coughing as she went. The man whom Ashe had taken for a Genevese professor, looked after her, glanced at his neighbour, and shrugged his shoulders. 'Phthisique,' he said with a note of pity. The other nodded. 'Et d'un type très-avancé!'

They moved towards the door, and stood looking into the night which was dark with intermittent rain. Ashe studied a map of the Commune which hung on the wall beside him, till at a moment when the passage had become comparatively clear he turned and went upstairs.

The door of his improvised *salon* was ajar. Beyond it, his valet was coming out of his bedroom, with wet clothes over his arm. Ashe hesitated. But the man had been with him through the greater part of his married life, and was a good heart. He beckoned him back into the room he was leaving and the two stepped inside.

'Dell, my good fellow, I want your help. I have just met my wife here—Lady Kitty.—You understand.—

Neither of us of course had any idea.—Lady Kitty is very ill. We wish to have a conversation—uninterrupted. I trust you to keep guard.'

The young man, son of one of the Haggart gardeners, started and flushed, then gave his master a look of sympathy.

'I'll do my best, sir.'

Ashe nodded and went back to the next room. He closed the door behind him. Kitty, who was sitting by the fire, half rose. Their eyes met. Then with a stifled cry he flung himself down, kneeling, beside her, and she sank into his arms. His tears fell on her face, anguish and pity overwhelmed him.

'You may!'—she said brokenly, putting up her hand to his cheek, and kissing him,—'You may! I'm not mad or wicked now,—and I'm dying.'

Agonised murmurs of love, pardon, self-abasement, passed between them. It was as though a great stream bore them on its breast; an awful and majestic power enwrapped them, and made each word, each kiss, wonderful, sacramental. He drew himself away at last, holding her hair back from her brow and temples, studying her features, his own face convulsed.

'Where have you been? Why did you hide from me?'

'You forbade me,' she said, stroking his hair. 'And it was quite right. The dear Dean told me,—and I quite understood. If I'd gone to Haggart then, there'd have been more trouble. I should have tried to get my old place back. And now it's all over. You can give me all I want, because I can't live. It's only a question of months, perhaps weeks. Nobody could blame you, could they? People don't laugh, when—it's death. It simplifies things so,—doesn't it?'

She smiled, and nestled to him again.

'What do you mean?' he said, almost violently. 'Why are you so ill?'

'It was Bosnia first, and then—being miserable—I suppose. And Poitiers was very cold,—and the nuns very stuffy, bless them,—they wouldn't let me have air enough.'

He groaned aloud while he remembered his winter in London, in the forlorn luxury of the Park Lane house.

'Where have you been?' he repeated.

'Oh! I went to the *Sœurs Blanches*,—you remember? —where I used to be. You went there, didn't you?'—he made a sign of miserable assent—'but I made them promise not to tell! There was an old mistress of Novices there still, who used to be very fond of me. She got one of the houses of the Sacré Cœur to take me in—at Poitiers. They thought they were gathering a stray sheep back into the fold, you understand, as I was brought up a Catholic —of sorts. And I didn't mind!' The familiar intonation, soft, complacent, humorous, rose like a ghost between them.—'I used to like going to Mass. But this Easter they wanted to make me "go to my duties"—you know what it means?—and I wouldn't. I wanted to confess';—she shuddered and drew his face down to hers again,—'but only once—to—you—and then, well then, to die, and have done with it. You see I knew one can't get on long with three-quarters of a lung. And they were rather tiresome—they didn't understand. So three weeks ago I drew some money out, and said good-bye to them. Oh! they were very kind, and very sorry for me. They wanted me to take a maid, and I meant to. But the one they found wouldn't come with me when she saw how ill I was,—and it all lingered on,—so one day I just walked out to the railway station and went to Paris. But Paris was rainy,—and I felt I must see the sun again. So I stayed two nights at a little hotel Maman

used to go to—horrid place!—and each night I read your speeches in the reading room,—and then I got my things from Poitiers, and started,——'

A fit of coughing stopped her, coughing so terrible and destructive that he almost rushed for help. But she restrained him. She made him understand that she wanted certain remedies from her own room across the corridor. He went for them. The door of this room had been shut by the observant Dell, who was watching the passage from his own bedroom further on. When Ashe had opened it he found himself face to face as it were with the foaming stream outside. The window, as he had seen it before, was wide open to the waterfall just beyond it, and the temperature was piercingly cold and damp. The furniture was of the roughest, and a few of Kitty's clothes lay scattered about. As he fumbled for a light, there hovered before his eyes the remembrance of their room in Hill Street, strewn with chiffons, and all the elegant and costly trifles that made the natural setting of its mistress.

He found the medicines and hurried back. She feebly gave him directions. 'Now the strychnine!—and some brandy.'

He did all he could. He drew some chairs together before the fire, and made a couch for her with pillows and rugs. She thanked him with smiles and her eyes followed his every movement.

'Tell your man to get some milk!—And listen,'—she caught his hand. 'Lock my door. That nice woman downstairs will come to look after me, and she'll think I'm asleep.'

It was done as she wished. Ashe took in the milk from Dell's hands, and a fresh supply of wood. Then he turned the key in his own door and came back to her. She was lying quiet, and seemed revived.

'How cosy!' she said with a childish pleasure looking round her at the bare white walls and scoured boards, warmed with the fire-light. The bitter tears swam in Ashe's eyes. He fell into a chair on the other side of the fire, and stared—seeing nothing—at the burning logs.

'You needn't suppose that I don't get people to look after me!' she went on, smiling at him again, one shadowy hand propping her cheek. And she prattled on about the kindness of the chambermaids at Vevey and Brieg, and how one of them had wanted to come with her as her maid. 'Oh! I shall find one at Florence if I get there—or a nurse. But just for these few days I wanted to be free! In the winter there were so many people about—so many eyes! I just pined to cheat them—get quit of them. A maid would have bothered me to stay in bed and see doctors—and you know, William, with this illness of mine you're so *restless*!'

'Where were you going to?' he said, without looking up.

'Oh! to Italy somewhere,—just to see some flowers again,—and the sun. Only not to Venice!'—

There was a silence, which she broke by a sudden cry as she drew him down to her—

'William! you know—I was coming home to you, when that man—found me.'

'I know.—If it had only been I who killed him!'

'I'm just—*Kitty*!' she said choking,—'as bad as bad can be. But I couldn't have done what Mary Lyster did.'

'Kitty—for God's sake!'—

'Oh I know it,'—she said, almost with triumph,—'now I *know* it! I determined to know—and I got people in Venice to find out. She sent the message—that told him where I was—and I know the man who took it. I suppose it would be pathetic if I sent her word that I had forgiven her. But I *haven't*!'

Ashe cried out that it was wholly and utterly inconceivable.

'Oh no!—she hated me because I had robbed her of Geoffrey. I had killed her life I suppose,—she killed mine. It was what I deserved, of course; only just at that moment,—If there is a God, William, how could He have let it happen so?'

The tears choked her. He left his seat, and kneeling beside her, he raised her in his arms, while she murmured broken and anguished confessions.

'I was so weak—and frightened. And *he* said, it was no good trying to go back to you. Everybody knew I had gone to Verona—and he had followed me—No one would ever believe—And he wouldn't go—wouldn't leave me. It would be mere cruelty and desertion, he said. My real life was—with him. And I seemed—paralysed. Who *had* sent that message? It never occurred to me—I felt as if some demon held me—and I couldn't escape—'

And again the sighs and tears, which wrung his heart—with which his own mingled. He tried to comfort her; but what comfort could there be? They had been the victims of a crime as hideous as any murder; and yet—behind the crime—there stretched back into the past the preparations and antecedents by which they themselves, alack, had contributed to their own undoing. Had they not both trifled with the mysterious test of life?—he no less than she? And out of the dark had come the axe-stroke that ends weakness, and crushes the unsteeled inconstant will.

After long silence, she began to talk in a rambling delirious way of her months in Bosnia. She spoke of the *cold*,—of the high mountain loneliness—of the terrible sights she had seen—till he drew her shuddering

closer into his arms. And yet there was that in her talk which amazed him; flashes of insight, of profound and passionate experience, which seemed to fashion her anew before his eyes. The hard peasant life, in contact with the soil and natural forces; the elemental facts of birth and motherhood, of daily toil and suffering; what it means to fight oppressors for freedom, and see your dearest,—son, lover, wife, betrothed,—die horribly amid the clash of arms; into this cauldron of human fate had Kitty plunged her light soul; and in some ways, Ashe scarcely knew her again.

She recurred often to the story of a youth, handsome and beardless, who had been wounded by a stray Turkish shot, in the course of the long climb to the village where she nursed. He had managed to gain the height, and then killed by the march as much as by the shot, he had sunk down to die, on the ground-floor of the house where Kitty lived.

'He was a stranger—no one knew him in the village—no one cared. They had their own griefs. I dressed his wound—and gave him water. He thought I was his mother, and asked me to kiss him. I kissed him, William—and he smiled once—before the last hemorrhage. If you had seen the cold dismal room—and his poor face!'

Ashe gathered her to his breast. And after a while, she said, with closed eyes—

'Oh what pain there is in the world, William!—what *pain*! That's what—I never knew.'

The evening wore on. All the noises ceased downstairs. One by one the guests came up the stone stairs and along the creaking corridor. Boots were thrown out; the doors closed. The strokes of eleven o'clock rang out from the village campanile; and amid the quiet of the now drizzling rain, the echoes of the bell lingered on the

ear. Last of all a woman's step passed the door; stopped at the door of Kitty's room, as though someone listened, and then gently returned. 'Fräulein Anna!' said Kitty—'she's a good soul.'

Soon nothing was heard but the roar of the flooded stream on one side of the old narrow building, and the dripping of rain on the other. Their low voices were amply covered by these sounds. The night lay before them; safe and undisturbed. Candles burnt on the mantelpiece, and on a table behind Kitty's head was a paraffin lamp. She seemed to have a craving for light.

'Kitty!'—said Ashe, suddenly bending over her,—'understand! I shall never leave you again.'

She started, her head fell back on his arm, and her brown eyes considered him:

'William!—I saw the "Standard" at Geneva. Aren't you going home—because of politics?'

'A few telegrams will settle that. I shall take you to Geneva to-morrow. We shall get doctors there.'

A little smile played about her mouth,—a smile which did not seem to have any reference to his words or to her next question.

'Nobody thinks of the book now, do they, William?'

'No, Kitty, no!—It's all forgotten, dear.'

'Oh! it was abominable.' She drew a long breath. 'But I can't help it—I did get a horrid pleasure out of writing it,—till Venice,—till you left off loving me. Oh! William, William!—what a good thing it is I'm dying.'

'Hush, Kitty—hush.'

'It gives one such an unfair advantage though, doesn't it? You can't ever be angry with me again. There won't be time. William dear!—I haven't had a brain like other people. I know it. It's only since I've been so ill—that I've been sane! It's a strange feeling—as though one had been *bled*—and some poison had drained

away. But it would never do for me to take a turn and live! Oh no!—people like me are better safely under the grass. Oh, my beloved, my beloved!—I just want to say that, all the time, and nothing else.—I've hungered so to say it!'

He answered her with all the anguish, all the passionate fruitless tenderness, and vain comfortings that rise from the human heart in such a strait. But when he asked her pardon for his hardness towards the Dean's petition, when he said that his conscience had tormented him thenceforward, she would scarcely hear a word.

'You did quite right,' she said, peremptorily,—'quite right.'

Then she raised herself on her arm and looked at him.

'William!' she said, with a strange kindled expression 'I—I don't think I can live any more! I think—I'm dying—here—now!'

She fell back on her pillows, and he sprang to his feet, crying that he must go for Fräulein Anna, and a doctor. But she held him feebly, motioning towards the brandy and strychnine. 'That's all—you can do.'

He gave them to her, and again she revived and smiled at him.

'Don't be frightened. It was a sudden feeling—it came over me—that this dear little room—and your arms—would be the end. Oh! how much best!—There!—that was foolish!—I'm better. It isn't only the lungs, you see; they say the heart's worst. I nearly went at Vevey, one night. It was such a long faint.'

Then she lay quiet, with her hand in his, in a dreamy peaceful state, and his panic subsided. Once she sent messages to Lady Tranmore—messages full of sorrow, touched also—by a word here, a look there—by the charm of the old Kitty.

'I don't deserve to die like this,' she said once, with a half-impatient gesture. 'Nothing can prevent it's being beautiful—and touching—you know; our meeting like this—and your goodness to me. Oh! I'm glad. But I don't want to glorify—what I've done.—*Shame*!—*Shame*!'

And again her face contracted with the old habitual agony, only to be soothed away gradually by his tone and presence, the spending of his whole being in the broken words of love.

Towards the morning, when, as it seemed to him, she had been sleeping for a time, and he had been, if not sleeping, at least dreaming awake beside her, he heard a little low laugh, and looked round. Her brown eyes were wide open, till they seemed to fill the small blighted face; and they were fixed on an empty chair the other side of the fire.

'It's so strange—in this illness,' she whispered—'that it makes one dream—and generally kind dreams. It's fever—but it's nice.' She turned and looked at him. 'Harry was there, William—sitting in that chair. Not a baby any more—but a little fellow—and so lively, and strong, and quick. I had you both—*both*.'

Looking back afterwards, also, he remembered that she spoke several times of religious hopes and beliefs—especially of the hope in another life—and that they seemed to sustain her. Most keenly did he recollect the delicacy with which she had refrained from asking his opinion upon them, lest it should trouble him not to be able to uphold or agree with her; while, at the same time, she wished him to have the comfort of remembering that she had drawn strength and calm, in these last hours, from religious thoughts.

For they proved indeed to be the last hours. About three the morning began to dawn, clear and rosy, with rich lights striking on the snow. Suddenly Kitty sat up,

'AFTER LONG GRIEF AND PAIN'

disengaged herself from her wraps, and tottered to her feet.

'I'll go back to my room,' she said in bewilderment. 'I'd rather.'

And as she clung to him, with a startled yet half-considering look, she gazed round her, at the bright fire, the morning light, the chair from which he had risen,—his face.

He tried to dissuade her. But she would go. Her aspect however was death-like, and as he softly undid the doors, and half-helped half-carried her across the passage, he said to her that he must go and waken Fräulein Anna and find a doctor.

'No—no.' She grasped him with all her remaining strength; 'stay with me.'

They entered the little room, which seemed to be in a glory of light, for the sun striking across the low roof of the inn had caught the foamy waterfall beyond, and the reflection of it on the white walls and ceiling was dazzling.

Beside the bed she swayed and nearly fell.

'I won't undress,' she murmured,—'I'll just lie down.'

She lay down with his help, turning her face to make a fond, hardly articulate sound, and press her cheek against his. In a few minutes it seemed to him that she was sleeping again. He softly went out of the room and downstairs. There, early as it was, he found Fräulein Anna, who looked at him with amazement.

'Where can I find a doctor?' he asked her; and they talked for a few minutes, after which she went upstairs beside him, trembling and flushed.

They found Kitty lying on her side, her face hidden entirely in the curls which had fallen across it, and one arm hanging. There was that in her aspect which made

them both recoil. Then Ashe rushed to her with a cry, and as he passionately kissed her cold cheek, he heard the clamour of the frightened girl behind him. 'Ach, Gott!—Ach, Gott!'—and the voices of others, men and women, who began to crowd into the narrow room.